

"How many loaves have you? Go and see." (Mk. 6:38)

**14:17 And they say to him, We have here but five loaves and two fish.** It was Andrew who turned up the lad with the lunch (Jn. 6:8, 9). But even his attitude reflects the consensus of pessimism among the others: ". . . but what are they among so many?" His observation is fundamentally, though not intentionally, unbelieving. He simply did not take into consideration Jesus' power, even though both he and Philip had experienced it so long. (Cf. Jn. 14:9)

*Five loaves:* we must not judge these by the size of American loaves of bread and conclude that the boy was making a major bakery delivery! The barley flour loaves (literally "breads") were, rather, more probably the size of hamburger buns, only flatter, more like pancakes. (See Lk. 11:5, 6 where three are considered enough for one late-night guest.) The very attitude toward the use of barley flour for making these flatcakes, however delicious, tended to consider them as "poor folks' food." (Cf. Judg. 7:13; 2 Kg. 7:1; Ezek. 4:12 in context) *The fish* were no whoppers either, because John the fisherman called them "little fish" (Jn. 6:9). In fact, he used a word, *opsaria*, which means "tidbits to be eaten with bread," perhaps even the same hors d'oeuvres for which Tarichea ("Pickletown," or a fish salting establishment) was famous over on the west side of the lake.

**We have here but five loaves and two fishes:** this is the woeful result of a thorough search for food ordered by the Lord. (Mk. 6:38) It is quite possible that He deliberately insisted upon this search in order to foredoom any slander that would discount the miraculous by insinuating that there was actually more food available than just a mere lunch. (Cf. Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 114, who reduces the miracle of multiplication of food to an act of sharing by changed, now unselfish people.) If such were the case, both the search and this dismal report would be utter fiction!

**14:18 And he said, Bring them hither to me.** Does this mean that the disciples were to buy the food from the lad, or encourage him to loan it to the Lord? At any rate, it must have required some open-handed generosity on the boy's part to turn his entire lunch over to Jesus when he could probably guess that, normally, it would have filled only him up, but would not be near enough for many others. *To me:* how often had Jesus been table guest of others? None the less, here He provides a needed meal at His own expense for thousands, and, incidentally, provided simple proof that, though others provided Him some financial support (Lk. 8:3), He accepted

it not because He was otherwise unable to provide for His needs and those of His companions. Not only did He refuse to work miracles for His own benefit—and, by extension, for His closer followers,—rather, He humbled Himself to the real level of our common human experience, yes, even to the point of becoming dependant upon the financial support of others. But in our text He rises to the full height of His lordly power by supplying the needs of others by the full exercise of the power of God! Little is always a great deal when Jesus gets hold of it.

**14:19 He commanded the multitudes to sit down** by ordering the Twelve to organize the well-nigh unmanageable people into orderly groups of fifties and hundreds. The language Jesus used indicated to people definite preparation for a picnic on the grounds: "Cause them to lie down to eat (*kataklinâte, anaklithênai*) in dinner parties (*sympòsia, sympòsia; klisias*; Mk. 6:39; Lk. 9:14). The number of guests was easily tallied from the orderly arrangement which also facilitated the rapid serving and simplified its completion. It also eliminated the usual selfish thoughtlessness of those who would crowd around those who were distributing food. Jesus first mastered the confusion by organizing the people who would have caused it. Here, too, is thoughtful consideration for the weak.

**Sit down on the grass**, because "there was much grass in the place." (See on 14:13b for McGarvey's argument and description of the area.) Thanks to Mark's adjective, "green grass" (Mk. 6:39) and John's "much grass" as well as his note that this incident occurred around Passover (Jn. 6:4), we may date this incident in the spring about two weeks after the full moon. McGarvey (*Evidences of Christianity*, 87) points out that "a few weeks before this, grass is not abundant, and a few weeks later it is dry."

**He took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven . . .** Whether or not He had before this moment mentioned His intention to multiply the food miraculously, His pantomime speaks eloquent volumes. **Looking up to heaven** certainly draws everyone's attention to the Heavenly Father as Provider, giving Him glory before eating at His table as in His presence. (1 Co. 10:31; Ro. 14:6) But it also argues for that openness with which Jesus the Son could communicate with the Father, as if He were just looking right into the Father's face. (Cf. Jn. 11:41; 17:1) **He blessed:** Matthew used *blessed (eulôgesen)* without an object that would indicate what Jesus blessed, a usage which might be better rendered: "He gave thanks and praise." (Arndt-Gingrich, 322) However, if the food

be inferred as its object, as in fact Luke states (*eulògesen autoùs*), Jesus' prayer in reference to the food is the typically sacerdotal act of every believer who eats his meals with thanksgiving, and so consecrates it by the word of God and prayer. (Cf. 1 Ti. 4:3, 4) John (6:11) speaks of Jesus' prayer as a remarkable giving of thanks (*eucharistésas*), remarkable because worth mentioning again as having importance in the working of the miracle. (Cf. Jn. 6:23) Jesus' thanksgiving, however, is not faked: He was glad to receive this simple fare from the Father's hand. Certainly He would and could do more with it than any other man, but this does not detract from the sincerity and simplicity with which He depends upon the Father's provision and power. **HERE** is the power and secret of faith: that open-hearted, confident dependence upon God, that giving God glory before the people. (Contrast Numbers 20:1-12.)

But is it necessary, or even possible, without debasing the Gospel writers, to affirm so confidently, with Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 216) that

it is impossible to deny an allusion to the Eucharist, especially if attention is given to the words *looking up to heaven, He pronounced the blessing and broke the bread and gave it to the disciples*, (v. 19) desumed certainly from ancient liturgical formulae?

Even McMillan's comment (*Mark*, 85) assumes this connection as proved:

The terminology closely approximates the last supper (Mk. 14:22). Either the incident has been retold to bring out its anticipations of the Lord's Supper, or the actions of Jesus were familiar things which he then endowed with new significance in the last supper.

And yet, there is absolutely nothing in this text that could be explained as indicating any direct connection with the Last Supper except the coincidental similarity of Jesus' taking food and praying. The words cited by Cuminetti are completely explicable, not only in terms of habitual actions of Jesus, but especially in terms of the normal way a master of the house acts in two similar situations, by giving a benedictory prayer and beginning to share the food with his guests. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, I, 683)

**He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.** "And he divided the two fish among them all, as much as they wanted." (Mk. 6:42; Jn. 6:11) Trench's excellent apologetic

*Notes on the Miracles* (167) bears repeating:

This miracle, even more than that of the water changed into wine, when we endeavor to realize to ourselves *the manner* of it, evermore eludes our grasp, and baffles imagination. Nor is this strange; for indeed, how can it be possible to bring within forms of our conception, or in thought to bridge over the gulf between not-being and being, which yet is bridged over in every creative act? And this being so, there is no force in the objection . . . against the historical truth of this narrative, namely, that "there is no attempt by closer description to make clear in its details the manner and process by which this wonderful bread was formed." It is true wisdom, to leave the indescribable undescribed, and without so much as an attempt at the description.

Indeed, would not the critics pick at the description too?

When Jesus multiplied *the bread and fish*, however superior the quantity, the multiplied food remained *bread and fish*, i.e., the same delicious, however common, food it was. He could have created a feast of the finest delicacies. Is there something to learn here?

1. Contentment with the fare we receive from the Father by whatever means He chooses to provide it?
2. A principle of parsimony in miracles? That is, the miracle involved only what was strictly necessary to achieve the purpose for which it was done. For example, it was not produced in monstrous excess of the actual need: only twelve baskets of left-overs. It was not brought down miraculously from heaven: Jesus broke it Himself. Nor was it miraculously distributed: the Twelve had to do the leg-work.

**The disciples gave them to the multitudes:** the waiters at this banquet are none other than those reasonably successful miracle-working evangelists who had so stirred Galilee! (See note on 14:16.) Certainly, the food distribution was most easily handled by a few men directed by Jesus as fast as He multiplied the food, but were the mere mechanics of efficient distribution what interested Jesus? Did He not, rather, desire that the implications of their lack of vision and faith, and the implications of His presence and power dawn upon them? But note how He honored His men by making them respected co-laborers with Him, even though their faith was sagging. This notwithstanding, they were generously rescued from embarrassment and despair without a certainly deserved word of

rebuke from Him: what mercy!

Did the Twelve use the baskets, later so useful in collecting the leftovers, to distribute the food in the first place? This is more likely than that each disciple used only his hands to carry what he could to the hungry people in hundreds of trips.

To be able to increase the physical quantity of molecules of bread so as to feed such a multitude to satisfaction is to exercise the power of the Creator Himself. Anyone who could do this could have created a world out of nothing. Even if we could not witness that creation, this one, however, gives us a glimpse at what it means to possess nothing less than full creative power. Who is this Man who enjoys such power?

**14:20 And they all ate, and were filled.** All four Gospel writers lay stress on the abundance of the sandwiches: everyone had all he could eat. (Jn. 6:11; cfr. *echortàsthesan, eneplésthesan*) This means second and third helpings: no miserliness here. What a contrast to Philip's estimate that a large purchase of bread would be insufficient "for each of them to get a little!" (Jn. 6:7) What a contrast to Andrew's pessimism: "But what are they among so many?" (Jn. 6:9) These people had been waiting all day to eat too! What a travesty on truth to suggest, with some, that the miracle consisted merely in making a small amount of food seem enough for them to nourish them sufficiently to arrive clear home! This kind of comment clearly ignores the witnesses and their unequivocal testimony.

At this point Jesus ordered the re-collection of the left-overs (*tà perisseúsanta*). Several motivations for this move suggest themselves:

1. His major purpose is stated: "that nothing be lost." (Jn. 6:12) Merely because He could endlessly multiply miracle-food is absolutely no reason for wastefulness of even the left-overs! Lenski (*Matthew*, 567) reminds that "some people always take too much. So here, some took pieces from the disciples of which they could not take even a bite, being so filled." Plummer (*Luke*, 245) notes that details of this character guarantee against the possibility that the entire story is a deliberate fiction or a myth, because of the incongruity of representing "one who could multiply food at will as giving directions that the fragments should not be wasted (Jn. 6:12). The possessor of an inexhaustible purse is never represented as being watchful against extravagance."
2. Further, be it a result and not a prime motive, it is a fact that *twelve baskets full* of sandwich makings are take-home evidence

that the miracle was real and abundant. After seeing those brimming baskets, no one could sneer that Jesus had made "just enough," but certainly could have made no more!

The *baskets* in question (*kōfinos*) were the picnic variety used by Jews on a journey to carry kosher food to avoid purchasing ritually unclean food from pagans. Such baskets were thought by the latter to be characteristic of Jews, as illustrated by the following quotations collected by Plummer (*Luke*, 245):

Juvenal: ". . . the Jews whose equipment is a basket and some hay." (*Sat.* iii. 14)

Martial: ". . . thou, Gellia, hast married a basket-carrier (=Jew)" (*Epig.* v. 17. 4)

As is clear from these pokes at the Jews, such satire would be impossible if the majority of the audience did not instantly recognize the basis of these jokes, were it not characteristic of the Jews to carry such baskets.

3. Lenski (*Matthew*, 568) suggests that the *twelve baskets full* were intended for the Apostles themselves, because, having fed all the others, they may now finally sit down around Jesus with ample provision for their needs. All they had shared with others had, by Jesus' power, now returned to them with interest, and by that same supernatural might, they could still share this food with thousands more, if need be, and give God thanks.
4. The *twelve baskets full* were probably carried by twelve red-faced men who had earlier balked at the seemingly impossible challenge: "You give them something to eat!" with no more real working materials than their own faith in God's miraculous power and a handful of sandwiches. They finished the evening with more groceries than they started with, and ironically, at the beginning, even with Jesus present, even with their own miracle-working power, they had dared to think that they had nothing! Compare their lack of confidence with the quiet reliance of Elisha. (2 Kg. 4:42-44)

**14:21 And they that did eat were about five thousand men, besides women and children.** Why bother to take a count even for the record?

1. In order to furnish the reader an adequate conception of the magnitude of this miracle. It is noteworthy that Luke and John mention the massive numbers during the conversation between Jesus and the Twelve at the time of their disturbance over their lack of resources. It would seem that these Gospel writers chose

that moment to indicate the greatness of the crowd to impress the readers with the magnitude of the PROBLEM to be solved. Matthew and Mark, on the other hand, apparently reserved mention of the number until the close, in order to present the greatness of the SOLUTION.

2. The count is perhaps recorded, in order to forestall doubts about the miracle's real occurrence, because Matthew cites how many male witnesses were present and qualified to testify to its reality. The very astronomical nature of the number challenges the dubious reader to begin immediately to seek out some of these men for an on-the-spot verification of the account. That many available witnesses and so precise a figure become powerful psychological stimuli to begin checking into the whole story of Jesus of Nazareth.
3. By counting only the men, the Gospel writers deliberately understate their evidence, and the resultant psychological effect on the reader is far more stunning upon reflection: if the women and children were omitted from the count, then the exact total must be considerably greater than 5000. The result (or was it purpose?) of mentioning only the men as *they that did eat*, is the disarming of any critics who would diminish the magnitude of the miracle by alluding to "the eaters" as a cluster of dainty women and little children who could manage on far less than hungry men.

**14:22 And straightway he constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and to go before him unto the other side, till he should send the multitudes away.** The reader of only Matthew and Mark would find quite inexplicable this urgency of Jesus that pushes His inner circle of disciples to embark, leaving Him on the land alone with the crowds. John furnishes the precious explanations:

1. "When the people saw the sign which He had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' " (Jn. 6:14) "And so the Baptist's last inquiry, 'Art Thou the Coming One?' was fully and publicly answered, and that by the Jews themselves." (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 685) This confession which apparently swept the crowd was formerly the very faith Jesus had sought to establish, yet its content was so badly confused about what the Messiah and His Kingdom should be, that He could not but respond negatively to their eagerness by hurrying them to leave for home.

This popular inference, perhaps even grounded in a tradition that the Messiah would feed Israel with bread from heaven (Cf.

2 Baruch 29:8; Sibylline Fragment 3:49; see Edersheim, *Life*, I, 176) was no surprise to Jesus, because He had deliberately planned for it. Everything had conspired together to lead people to this conclusion. Nevertheless, grounded as it was on good, undeniable evidence, it would prove the damnation of most of those who made it. They did not take the next step: "If He be The Prophet, let Him teach us! Whatever He says, however strange, disagreeable or untraditional, we will submit, because His message is the voice of our God who sent Him!" Their shallowness is measurable in the inconsistency between this confession made in the heat of popular enthusiasm one day, and their rejection of His doctrine on the next. (Cf. Jn. 6:25-66)

While their confession is grand enough for what they think they are saying about Jesus, they probably did not see that in this miracle He acted as the Lord of nature, multiplying its elements to supply the needs of His people.

2. "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king . . ." (Jn. 6:15) These wrong-headed messianic king-makers not only burned to see the Messianic Kingdom materialize; they were clamoring to make it materialistic! The Passover festival to take place shortly in Jerusalem nicely suited their plans for a triumph in the capital with Jesus as their Messianic King, acclaimed by these paschal pilgrims thoroughly excited and ready to march in His cause at a moment's notice.

*Send the multitude away* had been the disciples' advice (14:15) based on their ignorance of Jesus' intentions and power. Now, precisely because the Lord knows His own mind, He must *send the multitudes away*. This literal dismissal has the force of a symbol, because, due to the motives for which He sends them away, He personally marked the climax of the popular enthusiasm for Him. His refusal to accept the Zealot crown is, in their estimation, to commit political suicide, to ruin His image by extinguishing the hopes of all who, in sympathy with the nationalistic liberation party, had been expecting the Messiah to play the role of a God-sent neo-Maccabean to deliver Israel from all oppressors, establish a state that would rule the world and bring unprecedented wealth and glory to Israel. That He actually intended to drive away the unwilling and the unthinking is evident from His handling of a majority of these same people the next day in His Sermon on the Bread of Life in Capernaum, where, almost systematically, He unmasked their crassly materialistic reasons



for following Him, and bared the hard spiritual realities of His real Messiahship. (Jn. 6:25-66; cf. Ro. 16:18) Nevertheless, this attempt to make Jesus a political king will explain many of the unusual attempts to avoid publicity, His trips to foreign areas and deserted zones, and His desire for privacy. (Cf. Mt. 16:20; 17:9; Mk. 7:24, 36) In fact, although Matthew does not affirm it, this incident marks the acme and end of His great popularity with the Galilean crowds.

Jesus' reaction to the turbulent fanaticism was rapid and decisive: He instantly dampened all enthusiasm in three lightning moves:

1. He ordered the sudden sailing of His disciples to separate this precious nucleus from the well-nigh overpoweringly passionate enthusiasm of the crowds.
2. He calmly but decisively dismissed the crowds.
3. He hiked up into the hills alone.

Without violence, in this one unhesitating move He saved His disciples, avoided the wrong crown and made no one particularly angry. After all, the picnic was over and it was time to go home anyway.

*Till He should send the multitudes away* sounds like the Twelve were to await His arrival at the beach after the dismissal, and as suggested at 14:24, they may have so interpreted it. However, He had not specified **HOW** or **WHEN** He would rejoin them, so there is no promise implied here that Jesus did not keep, because He **DID** rejoin them before they could arrive at their destination anyway.

However, the Apostles sailed because of sheer obedience, not because what He required of them made any sense. After all **THIS** was the moment for which they had prayed, the moment when He would accept the Messianic Crown and popular acclaim, and proclaim the Kingdom. Instead, if He sends them away in a boat this way, they will miss it all! Yet their obedience is remarkable for its reality, despite their seemingly justifiable reasons to do anything but what He ordered.

#### IV. JESUS' PRAYERS

14:23 **He . . . sent the multitudes away**, and, in fact, most of them did depart outright. Nonetheless, some lingered around the area overnight, hoping to encounter Him as He returned from His mountain vigil. Next morning, when He did not appear, they boarded some boats from Tiberias to sail for Capernaum in search of Him.

(Jn. 6:22-25)

In the meantime, however, **He went up into the mountain by himself to pray.** (Cf. Lk. 6:12) From the plain at a level nearly equal with the surface of the Sea of Galilee, the hills that form the backdrop for the plain would seem like mountains seen from below. In fact, the Bashan hills rise nearly 3000 feet above the surface of the lake. *To pray* nearly all night, i.e., from the fall of darkness when He sent the crowds away, until sometime after three in the morning. (14:25) McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 132) is so right to rebuke our surprise that the Son of God should spend so much time in prayer, since our astonishment only measures our ignorance of the life of Jesus, and our under-valuation of prayer.

About what Jesus prayed the text does not say, but did He not mention . . .

1. **THE WANTON WICKEDNESS OF THE ENEMY:** Could He have released all His bottled-up emotions about the assassination of John? Who could not grieve when the holiest man in all Israel, the very messenger of Javeh, Jesus' own cousin, had been ruthlessly chopped down in his prime by the wicked?
2. **WRESTLING WITH HIS OWN SOUL:** Would He not also have prayed for more self-discipline to withstand the temptation to accept an earthly crown and plunge personally into campaigns to right earth's wrongs, and vindicate John? John's death for righteousness only brought the cross more vividly before the Lord Himself. How real this was becomes more evident in His somber allusion to Judas Iscariot whose character, Jesus knew, all too well matched Satan's designs and who would betray Him. (Jn. 6:64, 70f) Next day in His scandalous sermon on the Bread of Life, He would exclaim, "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is MY FLESH! (Jn. 6:51)
3. **WEAKNESS OF HIS DISCIPLES:** Surely He interceded for His tiny nucleus of disciples who were so exposed to His same temptations. The passionate patriotism of the nationalists could not but touch these disciples too whereinsofar they shared those ideals. If the motives that once moved Simon the Zealot to cast his vote for violent revolution should infect the entire apostolic group, Jesus could see all His efforts to establish a spiritual Kingdom mercilessly wrecked from within.
4. **WORLDLINESS OF THE CROWDS:** And was there no prayer that the mind of people, blind to the spiritualness of His teaching

and Kingdom, should be opened to the realities He had tried so hard to depict? Was He even then rehearsing the thoughts that would burst forth in that career-ending sermon to be preached the next day in one mighty push to drive them, in despair, to request explanations as would real disciples?

5. WAITING UPON THE FATHER: But all these prayers—and more—keep His mind centered on the great God before Whom all human praise, honors, powers and crowns fade into insignificance. Was it only during the Gethsemane experience that He “offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death” or in which “he learned obedience through what he suffered”? (Cf. Heb. 5:7-9)

## V. JESUS' POWER

**14:24 But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary.** The boat did not arrive *in the midst of the sea* instantly upon the disciples' embarking and setting sail. In fact, John (6:16-18) recounts the disciples' hesitation that caused them to dally offshore, perhaps debating whether they should wait on Jesus' arrival or not. His demand that they sail for Capernaum had been clear enough, but His words had apparently not indicated whether or not they were to wait for Him offshore until He should have dismissed the crowds, in order to be free to come aboard and sail with them. The expression, “It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them” (Jn. 6:17b), suggests that, whereas they had decisively embarked in the general direction of Capernaum, they may have been hugging the eastern shore, scanning the plain for any indication of His arrival. But then it became too dark to see, and there was nothing left to do but obey His specific order to sail—with or without Him. Their expectation was mistaken, because He intended to pray alone. Even if they had been correct, their dallying offshore would have encouraged the crowds to believe that Jesus intended to embark as well, thus encouraging some to hang around Him until He did, thus slowing their eventual dispersing in the dark toward their homes. (Cf. Jn. 6:22)

The expression, *in the midst of the sea*, has been corrected by textual editors to “The boat was already many stadia from the land,” which agrees with John's remark shortly afterward: “When they had rowed about 25-30 stadia,” or roughly three or four miles on a

lake that is but six miles wide. (Cf. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 37) "The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing" (Jn. 6:18), out of the northwest, *for the wind was against them* as they sailed northwest toward Capernaum from the supposed site of the miracle of the loaves on the eastern lake-shore plain. (Jn. 6:17) The next day they disembarked south of their destination, at Gennesaret on the mid-western shore. (Mt. 14:34) Some mistakenly think the wind was out of the east-north-east and that it blew the ship in a south-westerly direction toward Gennesaret, for which explanation they must argue that the disciples were rowing eastward to keep themselves near the eastern shore to meet Jesus, but that the wind eventually nullified their efforts. (Cf. G.A. Frank Knight, *PHC*, XXIII, 245) This view pictures the disciples as never really attempting to go to Capernaum-Bethsaida, hence inexplicably insinuates an insipient disobedience to the Lord's specific orders to do so, excusing them for loving the Lord while disobeying Him. For a description of a storm similar to that faced by the Apostles, see Johnson-DeWalt, *Mark*, 184f, and notes on Matthew 8:24.

Sailing, at this point, against such a wind *and beaten by the waves*, was out of the question, so they turned to the oars. Their best efforts notwithstanding, "the disciples were straining at the oars" (*basanizoménous en tō elañein*, Mk. 6:48) or, battered in rowing, because the boat was battered by the waves (Mt. 14:24: *basanizōmenon*).

As Bruce (*Training*, 126) believes, if these men thought this literal storm terrible, they had yet to experience another spiritual hurricane the next day when they were to watch the fickle crowds who had the day before attempted to crown Jesus their Messianic King, turn abruptly away from in shock, disappointment and disgust. This sudden and violent apostasy would require gargantuan effort on the part of the Twelve to maintain their own headway against the waves of unpopularity and unbelief.

**14:25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking upon the sea.** The Romans divided the night guard-duty into four watches of three hours each, beginning at 6:00 p.m., thus *the fourth watch* ran from 3:00-6:00 a.m. So, calculating that the Twelve had actually started across at just after sunset; and that they had made no more than three or four miles by three o'clock in the morning, we must conclude that they had fought that storm for no less than six or seven hours, and probably more! This is obedience, because these men, accustomed to such storms, could well have turned the boat to run with the wind: their whole trouble was caused

by their insistence (in obedience to Jesus) in continuing against the wind. Their loyalty to Jesus kept them rowing. However, their fatigue was even greater, because of the lack of proper food and rest that had occasioned their escape from Capernaum, and because they had worked steadily with Jesus at least since their arrival at the scene of the multiplication of the food. These factors help to explain their reactions to what follows.

Why did Jesus come to them, *walking upon the sea*? Merely to take a short cut across the sea, rather than walk around the land?

1. Jesus decided to help them in their plight, because, as Mark (6:47, 48) describes the scene: "When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and He was alone on the land. And HE SAW that they were distressed in rowing . . ." The reader must ponder how that could be humanly possible if Jesus did not use superhuman vision.

Two factors must be remembered here:

- a. At Passover time the moon is full, lighting the entire lake. During the period March-April the Tiberias area sees an average of only eight rainy days. Besides, the storm wind does not necessarily presuppose any clouds to obscure the bright moonlight.
- b. Further, Jesus stood on an excellent point for observing the entire scene: the hills into which He had retreated after dismissing the crowds are the same hills used as observation points by Arab gun spotters on the Golan Heights in the Arab-Israeli wars.

In the same way that He saw the need of the multitudes and had compassion upon them, now, rather than send an angel to help them or calm the storm from where He was, compassionately He chose to come to them through the tempest Himself.

2. Their very circumstances furnished Him the opportunity to demonstrate even further His essential Deity in a manner, however incomprehensible, that was absolutely undeniable and real. Though the masses think of Him as some great Messenger come from God, His immediate disciples must know Him as the indisputable Lord of Nature. They need to understand that what Jesus can do with the molecules of five buns and two sardines, He can do with the molecules of a roaring sea beyond their control. In the one case He multiplied them; in the other He transformed them into a walkway that supports His weight. This nature miracle, like the transformation of water into wine, must lead them to conclude that He who comes to them, making the water support Him as

would any terrestrial surface, can be only He who created the seas and the dry land in the first place.

**He came to them, walking on the sea.** The only alternative to accepting this crisp, simple sentence as the expression of a historical miracle that actually occurred is either to deny the total history, because the witnesses are impugned as incredible, or follow those who, like Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 117) profess inability to decide whether a miracle occurred here or not. He argues that, since the Greek expressions *epì tês thalâsses* and *epì tèn thàlassan* CAN mean the same thing, i.e., "upon the sea" or "on the sea," or also "at the sea," "over the sea," or "towards the sea" respectively, and since *peripateîn* means "to walk, walk around," he concludes that Jesus walked around the head of the lake, saw the boat fighting the waves and came down toward the shore to help. Walking through the surf on the shore and the waves toward the boat, He came so suddenly upon them that they were terrified when they saw Him. While admitting that the above-mentioned Greek expressions may also describe a miracle in which Jesus actually walked on the water, he affirms that whatever interpretation of the Greek is chosen, it does not matter. While his own comments on Peter's walking on the water quite ignore the problem, that very incident is described in Scripture in such a way as to remove every ambiguity and reflect back on Jesus' walk on the waters. That disciple requested permission to "come to you upon the waters" (*eltheîn pròs sè epì tà hùdata*). Then he, too, "walked about on the water" (*periepâtesen epì tà hùdata*). Here it is clearly impossible for a disciple sitting in the boat some distance from any shore to "walk around . . . towards the water!" It is dubious translation or interpretation to presume two distinct meanings for the same words in so close a context unless moral or material considerations render identical translation impossible. Worse, such an interpretation as Barclay's ignores the eyewitnesses' location of the boat in the middle of the lake. Further, it ignores Jesus' intention to "pass by them" (Mk. 6:48): why should He do this, if, according to the theory, He was coming to help them? Again, it is everywhere presumed that Peter, in requesting to go meet the Lord, wanted to do precisely what he saw the Lord doing, and that, upon the Savior's invitation, he actually did so until the moment when his fear of the new element in which he found himself broke his confidence in Jesus and down he went. If he were only wading toward a shallow beach, he was in no need, no real trouble and needed no faith at all to do what Jesus

did. Therefore, Jesus' rebuke of his little faith is out of order. Finally, the Apostles' reactions to the whole scene is life entirely without explanation, were there no miracles here. (14:33; Mk. 6:51f)

14:26 How long had these men ardently desired Jesus to be with them as they battled the waves during that interminable night? Suddenly, **the disciples saw him walking on the sea**, and, ironically, their reaction to what they thought they saw was anything but relief. However, for a group of men caught in a potentially disastrous sea-storm at night, struggling at the oars to keep their boat afloat and make any headway against adverse winds, fatigued by their lack of rest for all the hours spent fighting the storm, their reaction to Jesus' appearance is quite natural: **they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost; and they cried out for fear.** Their fear is real, given the state of emergency; they are physically exhausted, unnerved by the persistence of the tempest, hampered by the darkness, when suddenly, unexpectedly someone sights the incredible, but perfectly visible, form of something or someone moving toward them on the water. Our condescending toleration of "their ignorance and superstition" is a comfortable criticism made in the tranquillity of our study, but shows little sensitivity for what real men felt in that careening boat.

The observation made about Jesus' ability to see the disciples' struggles with the storm (at 14:25 regarding Mk. 6:48), also permits us to see how **the disciples saw Him walking on the sea.** In the half-light of the paschal moon they could make out a shadowy figure striding across the waves, perhaps rising with each crest, drawing ever closer (Jn. 6:19). Mark's puzzling remark, "He meant to pass by them," has been variously interpreted:

1. He did it so that in their terror they would not abandon the ship to escape from this unnameable terror, and so drown before He could calm their fears. So, He did not approach the boat directly, but only on a parallel course.
2. Foster (*Middle Period*, 170) sees this tactic as showing Jesus to be perfectly independent of the boat in every sense. He is not saved by them: it is He who must save them.
3. Plummer (*Matthew*, 208) sees it as His desire to cause them to feel their need to cry to Him for help. He does not automatically help until they have identified in Him their only help.

Naturalistic attempts to discount this eyewitness account proceed by various routes:

1. By supposing that Jesus walked merely on the land, but it **SEEMED**

to the disciples that He walked on the sea itself, because they were closer to the land than they thought. (Cf. Jn. 6:21) However, is it credible to believe that they could make out the dim figure of a man walking along the shore, and yet be unable to distinguish the land itself on which he walks? Could they have been close enough to him to communicate with him and yet be unable to measure their distance to the shore with reasonable accuracy? For the interpretation of Jn. 6:21, see on Mt. 14:33. Further, if by "the fourth watch" we are not to understand its beginning, i.e., around 3:00 a.m., but, rather, its middle or end, i.e., around six o'clock, then predawn light may have permitted even better visibility, hence, more than ever precluding the possibility of honest error.

To accept the conclusion that a myth about a miraculous walking on the sea could have grown up around so common an experience as walking along the shore is to admit an absurdity greater than the hypothesis of the story's truth. Further, the myth-hypothesis leaves Peter's walk (in, at, near, or toward?) on the water completely without either justification or explanation.

2. By supposing mass hallucination: "they all saw him, and were terrified." (Mk. 6:49, 50) Men in this state of mind, it is said, would not have been calm, objective observers of the phenomena, and the excited shout of one could easily suggest to the others the subjective vision of something that, objectively, just was "not there." However, supposing the other details of this account to be true, which is perhaps asking too much of some critics, the detail about Peter's failure to walk all the way to Jesus on the water is left unexplained, as is also their embarking at the conclusion of Peter's walk with Jesus. Do hallucinations become so concrete as an additional Passenger in the same boat, whose very presence could be verified at will?
3. By supposing that the disciples, by their cry: *It is a ghost!* reveal an ignorance and superstition that would disqualify them as observers prepared to identify and report this strange phenomenon. (Cf. Lk. 24:37; Ac. 12:15) Several answers may be suggested:
  - a. The Evangelist reports them as shouting, as their first reaction, a hypothesis which was subsequently discredited by the facts. Had they first shouted, "It is the Lord!," we might have had more reason to suspect their psychological reaction, for, in that case, they would not have examined the possibility that they



- were themselves subject to the fear of ghosts. But, because they themselves eliminated the ghost-hypothesis, suggesting it as their most natural explanation, we do not have to suggest it.
- b. Only the determined antsupernaturalist (who is himself biased by that position) could fail to admit that the Apostles had, in their national historico-theological literature, Scriptural antecedents for seizing upon this explanation of that eerie figure moving across the waters now along side them. (Cf. 1 Sam. 28:8-20; Job 4:12-16)
  - c. Nor is it a necessary disqualification of the observer when he experiences terror without explanation when some unearthly figure appears to him. (Cf. Dan. 10:5-11; Rev. 1:17; Lk. 1:11, 12, 26-30; 2:9, 10) Rather, the terrified observer compromises his credibility when he DENIES his fear. Whatever the Twelve thought about the phantasms of others (cf. Wisdom 17:3, 14), their own immediate circumstances offered no direct explanation when they find themselves confronted with the weird figure now before them.
  - d. Finally, were the above-mentioned objection of real weight, is it likely that the early Christians (not to say: Matthew too) bent on glorifying the Apostles by the creation of myth around them, should have left in their tradition what to critical minds must reduce them here to "ignorant, superstitious men," unless this experience were so unquestionably authentic that no amount of Christian whitewash could cover their embarrassment? So; the accusation of disqualification because of the Apostles' cry of "Ghost!" is surprising evidence of the historicity of the account, since, as they recount it, they must objectively and dispassionately include what, to the critics, must appear a defect.

Whereas the expression, *It is a ghost*, implies to the English reader that the Twelve thought they were beholding a disembodied spirit, however, *ghost* translates *fàntasma*, a word used by the Greeks to express several ideas. It means "a phantasm, a false appearance, a specter; a vision, a product of phantasy, as in a dream; celestial phenomenon; a prodigy, a portent; a reflection (as in water); a semblance, an apparition; an image, a phantom" (Rocci, 1941) Which of these is nearest to the mentality of the Apostles in this instance?

1. The manner itself in which He approached them explains their bewilderment. They had never seen Him control the normal procedure of natural law in relation to His own body. Since the concept of His walking across the sea had never entered their minds, in the absence of any other rational explanation, they shout the first explanation that comes to mind. They might have meant no more than: "It is a marvel! It is a prodigy!"
2. Apparently everyone in Judaism believed in the reality of the spirit-world, except the Sadducees against whose position Jesus would both warn His disciples and later argue this point. (Cf. Ac. 23:6-9; Mt. 16:12; 22:23-33) It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that these Jewish Apostles should blurt out a perfectly Jewish explanation. It would, rather, be far more perplexing if they did not. In fact, for them, *fāntasma* may be equal to "spirit," *pneûma*. (cf. Lk. 24:37)
3. From the standpoint of the rebuttals previously suggested (under 3a-d) there need be no prejudice against the rendering "ghost," since the facts subsequently verified cleared up any misunderstanding this word might imply.

14:27 **But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.** He humanized even this stupendous miracle by His infectious good humor, greeting His friends, "Cheer up, boys, it's I Myself: no need for nervousness here!" Haggard eyes and worn muscles do not permit the most cheerful responses, but the Lord knew that the relief He brought them was capable of injecting adrenaline vigor into those tired bodies through a new positive excitement. He had not yet promised the end of their struggles, but they can take courage in His encouragement. When they recognized that familiar voice and could shout, not "It is a ghost!," but "It is the Lord!," their fear no longer had a basis, even though the wind continued to blast over the lake and the spray from the waves smashing the boat continued to dampen them.

## VI. JESUS' PEOPLE

14:28 **And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters.** What a mad mixture of motives

must have pushed Peter to blurt out this impulsive request!

1. Was there none of that boyishness that, without calculating consequences or implications, always wants to try anything someone else is doing?
2. Was there also impatient joy to run meet his Lord after a night of anxiety in the face of death on the sea? (Cf. Jn. 21:7) This impetuous demonstration of affection is really welcome to Jesus. Its only fault is its failure to weigh the consequences of its reaction. His is a psychological rebound from utter despair and fear to the opposite extreme of reckless joy and confidence.
3. There must have been also the conviction that Jesus' power was sufficient to permit him to do exactly what the Lord Himself was then doing. This is real faith, because it awaits an order to overcome this natural impossibility, because it is fully convinced that Jesus' power to make him do it is only limited by His will that he do so.

In the larger picture of Peter, that includes also his doubt and failure, we have that "combination (so strange and yet so natural) of confidence in the Master and confidence in himself. There is the usual impulsiveness (partly good and partly evil) . . ." (Plummer, *Matthew*, 209)

From this standpoint, then, Peter's *If it is you . . .* does not mean to doubt Jesus' identity, but rather state: "Since it is you, Lord . . ."

Since there is no indication in the text that Peter is trying to outdo and outdare his fellow-disciples by leaping to a mightier proof of his faith than the others, it is better to leave this out of the picture. After all, Jesus does not, in His later reproof, make any comparisons, as, in fact, He had to do after Peter's denials. (Cf. Jn. 21:15-19 in contrast with Mt. 26:33-35) It is unfair to Peter to read his later boasts back into this text when in fact they are absent.

Some redactionists just cannot conceive of Matthew's including this story about Peter as an event containing tremendous teaching power, without any intention to glorify Peter also. Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 218) exemplifies this:

To Mark's account, Matthew adds three verses about Peter vv. 29-31). Precisely because this attention is given to him, one cannot deny the important place Peter had in the primitive church, at least in the Judeo-Christian congregations; this will be confirmed by later passages in which Peter will appear as he

who speaks in the name of all the apostles (16:15-19, 22, 23; 17:24-27). However, another hypothesis cannot be excluded, that could easily be complementary to the one just mentioned: Peter is placed in the foreground because of his attitudes that set him forward as a prototype of the believer, full of enthusiasm and love for Jesus, however with an ever insufficient faith.

Is it not just as easy to interpret these same facts as tending to demythologize Peter the man and disarm any tendency to elevate him to honors belonging only to the Lord? In trying to ascertain any theological motive for this incident registered by Matthew alone, we should not overlook other possible apologetic motives:

1. Did he intend to show Jesus' power, not only to walk on the sea, and so reveal Himself as Lord of creation, but also His power to cause others to do it too? Great is the power to work miracles. Greater still is the power to confer power. (Cf. Notes on Mt. 10:1)
2. Was Matthew's intention for including Peter's walking on the water to show how Jesus' walk on the waves is to be understood, i.e., as a literal miracle, not otherwise? (See the naturalistic objections at 14:26.)

14:29 **And he said, Come!** Here is the gracious invitation given in response to a request for a sign of Jesus' identity based on the disciple's determination to trust Jesus, whereas the unbelieving Pharisees, attempting the same, were drowned! (Cf. Mt. 16:1-4) Admire the generosity of the Lord: He who could have foreseen Peter's failure of confidence in Him, still permitted His friend to share His divine power in this way. Jesus lost nothing of His uniqueness by letting Peter walk on the lake surface too, because He knew that the power to walk on the surface is one thing, while the power to cause others to do so too, is further evidence of His uniqueness and power. But even if these distinctions do not seem apparent, Jesus did not refuse Peter, saying, "No, stay in the boat, because if you walk on the water too, someone might think your power somehow equal to mine, and rob me of my proper glory!"

Further, as Lenski notes (*Matthew*, 573),

The faith which Peter manifests Jesus accepts and justifies. If it had not been true faith, or if wrong and foolish motives had prompted Peter, Jesus would never have given this command. Those who criticize Peter ought to see that their criticism really strikes Jesus who consents to Peter's proposal.

On the other hand, is it not possible that by this experience Jesus wanted Peter to learn his own character and his need for more dependence upon Jesus? If so, Peter's faith was not so well-developed as he supposed. Hence, the Lord consented to Peter's exposing his faith to this testing, to reveal to him the immaturity of his confidence in the Lord.

**And Peter went down from the boat, and walked on the waters to come to Jesus.** It takes courage to step out on a heavy sea. In fact, who could say, on the basis of Matthew's information whether the lake is not still in turmoil precisely as before Jesus' appearance walking on its surface? Lenski (*Matthew*, 571, 574) unnecessarily creates for Jesus a path level and smooth through the waves so that, whereas the boat is at first being pounded by the waves and roller-coasting, Jesus Himself is walking sedately on a level path through the waves. Then, accordingly, he sees the boat as entirely entering that calm path in front of Jesus, no longer wallowing as Peter calmly disembarked and started down the "path" toward Jesus, the "path" remaining calm while the lake still roared all around. But what is mistaken about seeing Jesus earlier, and now Peter too, as walking on the surface of the cresting waves with deep troughs that make walking difficult, even though Jesus' powerful will makes the surface to support their weight? It is more consistent with the data not to create such "paths":

1. It was when Peter saw the wind that he was afraid and began to sink (14:30), but if there had been a level path in front of him, the wind was not affecting at least this much of the sea.
2. However, the wind ceased only when they got into the boat. (Mt. 14:32; Mk. 6:51)

How and why did Peter *walk upon the waters*?

1. Was it PETER'S FAITH that worked the miracle by that power which Jesus had bestowed upon all the Apostles for their own evangelistic ministry? (Cf. Mt. 10:1, 8; Mk. 6:12f; Lk. 9:6) If so, his failure is perfectly understandable, even as was that of the nine Apostles who could not cast out the demon from the epileptic boy. (Cf. Mt. 17:16-21) The exercise of such power is entirely dependent upon the individual miracle worker's trust in Jesus (God), and where that confidence is weak or fails, for whatever reason, then he is unable to work the desired miracle. The Twelve had worked the same miracles as Jesus before. Here, then, Peter is seen doing the same miracle of walking on the water as does

the Lord, not, as we shall see, by his own independent power, but by faith sharing what the Lord offers him of His own power. (Cf. Jn. 14:12)

2. Or, on the other hand, did JESUS' POWER instantaneously cause the water to support Peter's weight in direct proportion to Peter's trust in Him? Was it Jesus' will alone that intended to work the miracle of which Peter was only the passive, however confident, participant?

To raise these perhaps inappropriate questions is to begin to grasp the relationship between the power to work miracles of the Apostles and that of Jesus. Between the Apostles' faith and will to do the miracle there had to be a perfect collaboration with the power and will of Jesus. This, in turn, was affected by the Apostles' concentration upon what Jesus is, and what He could do through them. In other words, their confidence in Him predisposed their entire being to become a channel through which He could function, but their will expressed itself in stepping out of the boat onto the water, anointing the sick with oil, casting out the demons, etc. On other occasions, where Jesus was absent, prayer aided this concentration upon God (Jesus) from whom all power comes. (Cf. Mk. 9:29; Jn. 11:41-44; Ac. 9:40ff; however, other miracles do occur where prayer is not specifically mentioned.)

14:30 **But when he saw the wind** whipping the water into mountainous waves, **he was afraid**. Admit it: his experience was absolutely unique among men! It is one thing to brave a storm from the inside of a relatively safe fishing boat one had used all his life. It is quite another to brave the same storm walking right out on those same mountainous waves, exposed to its full fury. Put yourself in his sandals and step out of the boat yourself before criticizing his terror. See yourself too far from the boat to brace yourself and not yet near enough to the Lord to grab His hand. Look around at the next wave towering over you, and try to remember what it was you were going to say about Peter! It was not a mere taking his eyes off Jesus that occasioned his fright and failure, as if all depended upon staring at the Lord. His MIND was taken off the Lord by turning his ATTENTION to the dangers that whirled around him. It was this distraction that fixed his mind on the hazards, that left him dizzy, helpless and fearful. Was he thinking about how deep the sea must be at the very point where he was walking? At this moment, total, unquestioning confidence in Jesus was replaced with dependence upon

upon his own feeble powers. But Jesus' powerful will made the water solid only for Peter's confidence in Him and only in relationship to the reality and strength of that trust. So, when fear took faith's place, the conditions Jesus placed upon the miracle were no longer met, the solid sea surface under Peter's feet melted into its normal state, and down he went. (The foregoing is not an attempt to explain the mechanics or the physical processes involved in this miracle, because, how Jesus did it, the Scripture does not inform us. It is only an attempt to understand the relationship between confidence in God and the power to work miracles.)

**Beginning to sink**, he did not swim, even though he probably knew how. (Cf. Jn. 21:7) Rather, his instinctive reaction is that of a believer,—desperately afraid, but a believer: **Lord, save me!** His faith becomes clearer to us if we imagine him turning away from Jesus and trying to reach the safety of the boat.

14:31 **And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him.** Lenski (*Matthew*, 576) makes the interesting suggestion that Jesus, in taking Peter by the hand, was not merely hauling him bodily out of the water. The fact that Peter was to walk with Jesus back to the boat on the water's surface indicates that he was to do so once again by faith in the power of the Lord. Therefore, says Lenski, Jesus did actually more than save Peter from going to the bottom. By His handgrip on Peter, He focussed Peter's attention entirely upon Himself, thus restoring in Peter that confidence which had been temporarily lost. As his confidence in the Lord's power is once again restored, so also the condition for which Jesus had originally exerted His power to help Peter walk on the waves.

Jesus' gentle rebuke is instructive for what He did not say: **O man of little faith** (not: "O man of no faith"), **why did you doubt?** (not: why did you attempt to come to me on the water?") Peter's mistake was not in boldly stepping out on faith when the Lord bid him do so, but in forgetting that his bold venture depended entirely upon the power and wisdom of Christ and his own unwavering confident dependence upon Him. Jesus sensitively points to the cause of Peter's trouble: "Your courage has already returned: your doubt is in the past; *why did you doubt?* You walked on these waves before doubt and fear of danger crowded out your courage. See, now that your confidence has returned, you are striding on their surface again. Because all things are possible to him who trusts me unreservedly, you, too, see that it was not impossible. In fact, everything depended on the steadiness of your nerve (= endurance and resolution.)

**Little faith:** cf. Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 16:8; 17:20; 28:17! These amazing references to the "little faith" of the early disciples stimulate us to understand that, though these people were unquestionably believers in Jesus at the intellectual level, their DEPTH OF CONFIDENCE in Him was far too shallow. This expression of faith is not that intellectual assent to evidence for the Messiahship and divine identity of Jesus that confesses Him as "Teacher come from God." (Cf. Nicodemus' attitude: while making this confession, he had not personally sounded the depths of his own conclusion. Jn. 3:1ff) Great faith, rather, is that unlimited confidence in His being able to do everything He leads us to believe He will, a confidence that surpasses our intellectual decision that He could do it, a certainty that permits us to do our part without distraction, regardless of the difficulties to overcome. Great faith, then, overcomes those mental reservations or psychological doubts about Jesus' (God's) care, power or willingness, once He has clarified what He desires. **Little faith**, then, still lives on the plane of the non-disciple in his concern with the worries of human beings unaided, uncared-for, unprotected by God's promises or Jesus' abilities. So doing, they bare their real confidence in their own, or in others' ability, care and wisdom. (See notes on Mt. 6:19-34; 8:10.)

Jesus did not rebuke Peter for daring more than the others, because, from the point of view expressed above, all Twelve Apostles, had they but so dared, could have confidently stepped out of that boat and walked to Jesus without a word of rebuke from Him. Hypothetically, their joining Him out there on the water could only have caused Him to exult in the depth of their reliance upon Him! In this sense, then, their remaining in the boat measures the limits of their vision, their confidence, their boldness, and, contemporaneously, exalts that of Peter. Jesus' rebuke, however, was intended to push Peter to reflect the next time. Bruce's sad comment is so appropriate (*Training*, 130):

But Peter was not to be made wise by one lesson, nor even by several. He would go on blundering and erring, in spite of rebuke and warning, till at length he fell into grievous sin, denying the Master whom he loved so well. The denial at the final crisis was just what might be looked for from one who so behaved at the minor crisis preceding it. The man who said, "Bid me come to Thee," was just the man to say, "Lord, I am ready to go with Thee both to prison and to death." He who was so courageous



on deck, and so timid amid the waves, was the one of all the disciples most likely to talk boldly when danger was not at hand, and then play the coward when the hour of trial actually arrived.

Defense of the account of Peter's walk on the water is the same as that for Jesus'. Either the whole story is to be embraced as historic fact, or it must be wrenched from the narrative as being totally false. It cannot be thought of as "a parable told for the spiritual lessons it contains, constructed entirely by some unknown editor of this Gospel quite unbeknown to the Apostle whose name it bears." Plummer (*Matthew*, 208) decides,

We have no means of knowing how the Evangelist became acquainted with the incident respecting Peter; but it was probably current among the circle of first Christians who had known Peter.

Was Matthew himself not in the very boat from which he personally witnessed the entire episode, and did he not record it in his Gospel? Plummer himself answers (*ibid.*, x):

The answer therefore to the question, Who was the author of the First Gospel? is a negative one. It was not S. Matthew. The writer was an early Jewish Christian, not sufficiently important to give his name to a Gospel, and in no way desiring to do so.

Such a position, based on the false presuppositions of modern critical schools, insinuates the doubtful authenticity of the report, hoping thereby to save the less problematic, or perhaps the more intellectually acceptable in the Gospel narrative for subjective faith, but the effort is vain. Although Plummer himself is assured that this narrative cannot be invention (*ibid.* 209), the seed is sown for doubting it. The position taken here is that of its perfectly tenable authenticity.

**14:32 And when they were gone up into the boat, the wind ceased.** John who omits Peter's walk on the water, adds here: "Then they were glad to take him into the boat" (Jn. 6:21: *éthelon oûn labeîn*, they desired to do so, and so did it. Cf. Jn. 8:44: *thélete poieîn*) Their previous terror of the ghostly figure has been completely replaced by the old familiar confidence in their Friend and Lord. How or why *the wind ceased*, or even its connection with the *time when they were gone up into the boat*, is not clear. Did Jesus rebuke the wind as He did on another occasion? (See on 8:23-27.) What is easily inferable is that the storm stopped because Jesus willed it. One more miracle is certainly not impossible after so many that day!

Even the comment at Jn. 6:21 that "immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going," reports what seems to be another miracle. However, this translation, while perfectly correct within itself, is ambiguous enough to leave the negative critic with a seemingly plausible argument for the conclusion that "the miracle happened near the shore and therefore was confused for a miraculous water crossing by a group of excited folk, or else elaborated by later myth-formation." Unless we are to conclude it as intentional fraud the earlier notice that Jesus approached the boat when it was "in the middle of the sea" (Mk. 6:47) "when they had rowed about three or four miles" (Jn. 6:19), hence many stadia from land in any direction (Mt. 14:24), then we must decide that the expression in question, "the boat was immediately at the land," refers only to a rapid arrival at the destination. Since John does not state nor necessarily imply a miracle, we are not obligated to affirm it. His language only suggests that, in contrast to the night-long fatigue of hard rowing into the wind, they were able to make such easy headway after the wind ceased, that it took practically no time at all to arrive in port. It is as if John were saying, "After our fatigue and fright, we took Jesus on board, and suddenly we were there!" John's telescoping must not be used against him, as if his testimony should be thought to contradict that of other witnesses.

**14:33 And they that were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.** This confession by the Twelve, so rich in significance, is not the spontaneous invention of the moment. There had been precedents that must have surprised them, but remained in their minds and surfaced here as the men find in this experience reason to voice their conviction. (Cf. Jn. 1:49; Mt. 8:29) Did their present sea-storm experience remind them of the earlier trip on which Jesus calmed the tempest, after which the demoniacs addressed Him as "Son of God"? The similarity of situations may have evoked the details of the other incident and suggested the majestic reality couched in the demons' mysterious form of address.

The ASV translators are probably right to render the disciples' anarthrous confession (*alethōs theou huiōs eī*) as they did: "the Son of God." Whereas it appears not to say, "You are **THE** Son of God" in the unshared sense intended by Peter later (cf. Mt. 16:16), nevertheless, when taken together with their mental attitude of worship when they said it, it leads to the conviction that they consider Him far more than a supremely godly man (= a son of God). However, their faith's foundation was less than it should have been, "for they

did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." (Mk. 6:52) This is because all foregoing miracles, expressly that of the supernatural multiplication of food, should have prepared their minds to consider nothing Jesus did as utterly incredible, since they would have been emotionally and intellectually prepared to see not only miracles like His bold walking on the water or His masterful calming the sea, but even His majestic ascension into heaven. (Cf. Mk. 6:51; Jn. 6:62) "Their heart was hardened," in this case, is not a symptom of opposition to Jesus, or that obduracy we associate with determined unbelief. Rather, in light of their relative opportunities, they are surprisingly slow to perceive that He possessed all the power He needed to do anything He willed. The very conclusion to which these breath-taking miracles should lead, but unfortunately was not yet part of their understanding, is that in these mighty works He is acting as the Lord of creation, altering and using its elements for His purposes to help His people.

It is important to note that Mark's record of the disciples' slowness to comprehend is not mere theological redaction (alla Wrede and disciples!), but a strong guarantee of the narratives' historical truth. A mythical representation would not so quickly admit such damning evidence of the Apostles' slowness, were the editor's intention to glorify those men whose position in the early Christian congregations was almost next to their esteem for Jesus. Rather, their remarkable slowness to understand and grow in confidence is the more psychologically plausible as we consider how painfully parallel it is to our own. We would have been far more skeptical perhaps had we read of ready confessions, easily arrived at with no hesitations or doubts. Their slowness to understand not only encourages us in our toiling to understand too. It also gives us confidence in these records of real people with real problems even in the presence of the Son of God!

Despite the admittedly less-than-perfect understanding of the disciples, several technical details need also to be weighed into the picture before we decide the content of their confession:

1. Nouns that designate persons of which there is only one of a kind, and come very close to being a proper name, do not require the article to make them definite; the article appears when the specific Jewish or Christian God or Lord is meant, but it is sometimes missing, especially after a genitive which depends on an anarthrous noun (especially a predicate noun)

as in our case: *alethôs theou huiôs ef.* (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, sec. 254, p. 133) From this standpoint, therefore, the disciples no more intended to say, "You are A son of God," than they meant, "You are a son of A God," because, for them, the absence of the article did not indicate a multiplicity of gods of which Jesus were a son.

2. The very addition of the genitive to modify a noun makes that noun definite, especially where a Semitic influence can be traced behind the Greek being used, because in Hebrew the noun governing a genitive would appear in the construction or with a suffix and hence would be without the article. The article is also omitted with the genitive noun in such cases (which was not required by Hebrew, but rather by Greek). (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, sec. 259, p. 135; However, see Robertson-Davis, 388.)
3. Colwell's rule, further, shows that definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article. (See Robertson-Davis, 283; Blass-Debrunner, Sec. 273, p. 143.)
4. If "Son of God" would not seem unambiguously definite on the basis of the foregoing, it must be recalled that even the Jewish enemies of Jesus so considered it when applied to Him. (Cf. Mt. 27:40, 43; Jn. 10:36; 19:7) Perhaps they did it on the basis of Ps. 2:7 which is anarthrous too. (cited also in Ac. 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5.)

Therefore, *huiôs theou* in the minds of these Apostles is as specific and definite as "God's Son" is in ours. (Lenski, *Matthew*, 578)

The very existence of this confession in a Jewish book raises the question whether the Twelve were hereby confessing Him to be "Messiah." Whereas the unique, unshared title "Son of God" speaks of a unique begetting by the Father, one of the concepts that is the stuff of Johannine theology, when found located here in a heavily Jewish apologetic, draws attention to its Jewish expectation as an appellative of the Christ. (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 716, demonstrates that Ps. 2:7 is quoted by the rabbis as Messianic.) But the distinction between "Son of God" and "Christ," as two separate titles for the same person, must be respected, since they refer specifically to two not necessarily connected aspects of His earthly mission: His unique generation and His anointing. Nevertheless, the net result of this confession for Matthew's Jewish readers is the conviction that here is one more convergence of reasons for considering Jesus in the way

His disciples confessed Him, i.e., as "God's Son" and worthy of worship. Later this same day, Peter gave fuller expression to this same confession. (Jn. 6:68, 69)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Why did Jesus go away to a desert place? List carefully all the various independent factors that led to this move.
2. What is a "desert"?
3. Where was this desert located?
4. Where was the city called Bethsaida? Which Bethsaida was this?
5. How did Jesus succeed in going to sit on a mountain to await the coming of the multitudes, if the crowd preceded them to the place? (Mk. 6:33)
6. In what likeness did Jesus see the crowds?
7. What did Jesus teach the crowd?
8. Who first mentioned the crowd's need for food?
9. What did the disciples advise Jesus to do with the hungry crowd?
10. How many people were there to feed?
11. How much food was found and brought to Jesus? Describe it.
12. Who found the food that was given to Jesus?
13. How did Jesus organize and carry out the feeding of so large a crowd?
14. How much bread was thought to be needed for such a crowd?
15. What was the reaction of the crowd to this miracle?
16. Why did Jesus send the disciples away *in a boat*? When did they leave?
17. Where did He tell them to go?
18. At what time of day did they leave?
19. What did Jesus Himself do after they left? Where did He do this?
20. What happened to the disciples on the sea? How far across the lake had the disciples travelled when this occurred?
21. How can we determine which way the wind was blowing that night?
22. What was Jesus doing when they next saw Him?
23. About what time was it when they saw Him?
24. What was their reaction to Him?
25. What did He first say to them?
26. What did Peter answer?
27. What did Jesus tell Peter to do?

28. What did Peter see that frightened him?
29. What uncomplimentary title did Jesus call Peter?
30. What did those in the boat call Jesus?
31. What amazed the disciples after Jesus got in the boat with them?
32. Why was this lake called "the Sea of Tiberias?"
33. What time of year did this event take place and what does this fact contribute to our understanding of specific details in the narrative?
34. Harmonize the variant accounts that describe the arrival of the crowds to the place to which Jesus led them for teaching, and, ultimately, the feeding of the people.
35. Give the evidences, drawn from the eye-witness testimony itself, that answer the purely naturalistic attacks which reduce the narratives of this miracle to common fiction, or legend, or worse.
36. List the facts or declarations made in this section that prove the supernatural identity of Jesus.

## SHARING THE BREAD OF LIFE

### A Non-expository Sermon

INTRODUCTION: Since Jesus Himself drew upon this event to present His message on the Heavenly Bread, in which He presented Himself as the Bread of Life to a dying world, we cannot be too far from the proper application of His teaching, if we see beyond the original, historical implications of the feeding of the multitude to grasp our part in His work of bringing His Life to a perishing world. The following message is NOT an explanation of the text, but an attempt at recognizing in our own situation our need to react as did He, but with the power He makes available to us.

### I. JESUS' PROBLEM—OUR PROBLEM

14:13b **The multitudes . . . followed him:** what a picture of the heterogeneous mobs that compose our society! All of the sanctity, selfishness, sordidness and sadness that He faced comprises our society too.

14:14 **He had compassion on them, and healed their sick.** Until we too can sympathize with the world's pain and weakness among people whose misfortune to be sick or old or weak is held in contempt

by the young, the powerful, the rich, we will not, with Jesus, believe in the usefulness of the rejected refuse of society nor attempt to reclaim for God those individuals sacrificed to the claims and interests of an indifferent society, insensitive to anything but its own pleasures and programs. We will not readily enter into Jesus' ministry until the pathos of life is vivid to us, until we appreciate the multitude of broken, disordered, disappointed and disappointingly wretched lives, until we see how much of childhood gladness crumbles, time-worn with grief, until we understand how much sin ends in misery and death. Nor will we be of much use unless we know and use the power at our disposal in deeds of real helpfulness and Gospel proclamation that brings joy, light, order, confidence and peace with God and men.

**14:15 And when even was come, the disciples came to him, saying, The place is desert, and the time is already past; send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves food.** How often we are staggered by the magnitude of our task, the inadequacy of our means and the shortness of the time to act! How often, when looking into such an ocean of faces, we conclude that our wisdom and knowledge is totally inadequate to work all the renovation needed to save them! In our despair we too are tempted to send them away to others seemingly more qualified or reputedly better able to solve their problems.

## II. JESUS PLAN—OUR PLAN

**14:16 But Jesus said unto them, They have no need to go away; give ye them to eat.** The Lord has ordered us to care for the spiritual nourishment of the world, and too often we forget the power at our disposal: the transforming power of divine truth! All the insight, sympathy, delicacy and preaching power we can muster can never be enough to effect the revolution needed. The most needed preparation of Jesus' servants for their world-wide ministry is their discovery that their own scanty resources are totally inadequate. Only thus can we be convinced to distribute from His inexhaustible supply.

**14:17 And they say to him, We have here but five loaves and two fish.** We too complain how little we possess for our task. Our Bible, for example, is so small in size, that it would seem to many as meager a resource as five barley buns and two sardines to feed thousands. Yet how many thousands upon thousands have been nourished thereby, and how many more it will feed until Jesus comes again, if only

shared with Jesus' blessing!

14:18 **And he said, Bring them hither to me,** With what is brought to Jesus, He works His miracle. In fact, He sets before each of us the tremendous responsibility of communicating His life and His message to men. However, He does not demand from us power, results and deeds that we cannot produce. He invites us, "Come to me as you are, however ill-equipped; bring to me what you have, however little, and I will use it greatly in my service." Little is always much in the hands of Christ. (Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 113) Jesus could save the world by quite other means than by its evangelization, by simply commissioning angelic messengers to speak peace to every last man on earth, or even more astonishingly, He could forcibly change each man's mind for him. But when we examine what God's word in His hands has already done, we cannot but appreciate His wisdom in choosing to do it this way.

### III. JESUS' PRAYERS—OUR PRAYERS

14:19 . . . **He took the five loaves, and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed.** The Son of God glorified the Father as the Giver of the food, and, by reflex consequence of the miracle that followed, the Power behind it. Contrast Moses and Aaron's miracle of bringing water from the rock, who without prayer nor mention of God's Name, struck the rock. (Num. 20:1-12) Remember God's rebuke: "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel . . ." Consider the disciples' impotence because of their little faith and prayerlessness. (Mt. 17:19, 20; Mk. 9:29) We, too, attempt great things for God, and yet we have not always the good sense nor the genuine confidence in Him to consider even the simplest blessings, as a means of achieving precisely the goal we seek. Nor do we always remember that all our greatest attempts are vain unless we actually glorify God in the minds of the people we attempt to bless by what we do.

### IV. JESUS' PROVISION—OUR PROVISION

**He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitudes.** Jesus could Himself go into all the world with His saving Gospel, but He has chosen to use men, His disciples, as the channel to bless others. But these disciples must give to others only what they have first received from Him.



**14:20 And they all ate and were filled.** What a mixture of theologies, ideologies and ignorance constituted the mind of that group Jesus so generously helped! No limitations were placed on previous affiliation, no embarrassing questions, no demands were made that those needy people prove themselves worthy of His blessing. They only needed to recognize their desperate need and accept the provision He supplied them. His Word is inexhaustible to bless any one who willingly submits himself to devour its contents to fill the need of his soul.

**14:21 They that did eat were about five thousand men, besides women and children.** Even in the same way that more food was available at the finish than at the beginning of the meal, so also the more people the Gospel is made to feed, the more people can actually be fed, since the more people become disciples to feed thousands of others in an almost infinite multiplication of the power of the Gospel outreach!

## CONCLUSION:

1. Rather than retreat behind lines of safety to conserve jealously what little reserves of Gospel power we suppose ourselves to possess,
2. Rather than use violent measures to drive away the unthinking, ignorant masses whose presence and failure to respond rightly to God's message not only embarrasses and frustrates us, but often outright hinders the work we are trying to do,
3. Let us plunge actively into the business of feeding the world with the Gospel means at our disposal.
  - a. We may not possess the same miracle-working potential Jesus shared with His Apostles and the early Christians.
  - b. But we can use every legitimate means at our disposal to make the Bread of Life available to the world. (Printing press, radio, television, conferences, conventions, evangelistic campaigns, personal witness, letters, etc.)
4. Are we praying in faith that God will work through us?
5. Are we exploring the use of every means that can be turned to useful service for God's glory?
6. Are we conscientiously and generously sharing with people what Jesus so unselfishly distributed to us?
  - a. Physical, material food, clothing and shelter, jobs and proper self-respect? God is concerned about men's bodies too!

- b. The problem-solving, soul-transforming victorious Gospel that alone can make men over again.

## THE EMBATTLED CHURCH

### A Non-expository Sermon

As with the preceding message, the following is NOT an explanation of the text, but a recognition of two parallel situations, one in the life of the Apostles, the other in our own ministry to Jesus. During that sea tempest, these disciples in that frail fisherman's boat constituted the heart of everything Jesus had accomplished on earth at the moment: His Kingdom and its future expansion, its victory or its failure were bound up in that small group straining at the oars, seemingly making no headway toward their ordered goal. Is not this a picture of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today? Let us see how, out of their problems, come suggestions that help us to solve ours:

### I. THE PROBLEM: DIFFICULTY IN OBEDIENCE

**14:22 And straightway he constrained the disciples to enter into the boat, and to go before him unto the other side, till he should send the multitudes away.** Often we, too, find ourselves where we do, because duty and love to Christ puts us there, even though everything is not clear to us. We question: "Why should we HAVE to live and work here without Jesus' personal presence?" Yet He has ordered us to set sail on our voyage to the port He indicated. Although we, too, long to be with Him immediately and forever, we embark and set sail, not because we understand His plans perfectly, but because HE is our Lord and He has given us this duty to perform.

**14:23 And after he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain apart to pray: and when even was come, he was there alone.** His very absence is part of our problem: Jesus seems to us quite far away, so far, in fact, that not only do we have only the slightest notion where He may be, but also it may seem that His absence itself is evidence of impassive indifference to our needs, our desires, our fears, our dangers and our prayers. But He is our Mediator, interceding on our behalf before the Father. (1 Ti. 2:5; 1 Jn. 2:1, 2; Jn. 14:16) He is busy preparing us a place in our Father's house. (Jn. 14:1-4)

**14:24 But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary.** Even though we have Christ's own orders under which we sail, we are not therefore exempt from danger and trouble. We too must battle the elements that constitute our life situation. Rather, we should expect such trials, because of the moral opposition that our very existence and preaching must arouse. (Jn. 15:18—16:4) Also, our physical and personal moral weakness will plague us until the final victory, even as those storm-tossed sailors fought their little faith and great fatigue that night.

## II. THE SOLUTION: THE COMING OF THE LORD

In this solution to our problems, we see three elements that counsel patience and steadfast hope, despite the continuation of our trials:

### A. THE CERTAINTY OF HIS CARE

**14:25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came unto them, walking upon the sea.** For good and sufficient reasons best known to Jesus, He does not always come to our aid when we most desire it, but rather in His own good time. It may be not only that He desires that we learn patience by the things we suffer. He may also see the need for time for certain situations to mature before He can answer our prayers as we prayed them. **BUT HE DOES SEE OUR NEED:** (Cf. Mk. 6:48 He **DOES** care and He **WILL** help! He is the Lord of difficulties, coming to us, walking over the very waves and against the same wind that so distressed us!

**14:26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a ghost; and they cried out for fear.** Too often we too form a stereotyped conception of the Lord and picture His help to us only in terms of this idea. Should He approach us in some way other than unmixed blessing, we do not recognize Him and become afraid. Should He come multiplying blessings, He is easily recognized and welcome, but somehow we suppose it cannot be the Lord if He arrives on the very waves of our misfortune. And yet it is He!

How often do others reduce Christ Jesus to a phantom, a delusion produced by a lively imagination and projected upon the minds of a gullible, superstitious mob! No longer the Son of God for them, His historical figure is little more than an unprovable, deliberate forgery, barely visible through the shimmering mists of legends, editorial

rewriting and pious misunderstandings. And yet it is He!

Far too often we do not recognize our truest Friend! We mistake Jesus for a jailed prisoner, a hungry, homeless, unhealthy beggar, unkempt and ill-clad, rather than welcome such as we would serve the Master Himself. (Mt. 25:31-46) Instead, we turn from them in disgust and horror, afraid to take them aboard our already battered craft. And yet it is He!

**14:27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid.** Suddenly the mask of the specter is ripped away, and He who seemed a terror greater than all the dangers of our existence, is no other than the Lord Himself! The earth and sea all around us continue to rage, but at the decisive moment all of this will be overcome by the cheerful, all-powerful word of the Lord of the Church. Everything will turn out quite differently from what we had feared, and certainly quite differently from all unbelievers supposed!

## B. THE CONFIDENCE TO DARE

**14:28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters.** When the entire Christian experience is considered from a human standpoint, when the work of the Kingdom of God is evaluated, human judgment must pronounce the whole thing as impossible as walking on the sea. In fact, we labor for results that go beyond human nature and we utilize means that function beyond human reason. Heroic souls, however, have always risen spontaneously to the challenge to enter into Christ's walk and work and dare to do the impossible, just to be with Jesus in His. Peter did not sin by daring great, impossible things for the Lord, nor do we!

**14:29 And he said, Come. And Peter went down from the boat, and walked upon the waters to come to Jesus.** A caution is in order here against a danger in our boldness. Note that before Peter hazarded stepping out onto the water in faith, he awaited the Lord's specific permission, and yet some bold Christians, without waiting for Jesus' orders, presumptuously and rashly dash into situations, expecting the Lord to support them in their folly. This service is not a willingness, but a wilfulness, because He did not command it. Naturally, we must not expect the Lord to speak from heaven to each of us as He did to Peter on the sea. Rather, we must judge each particular case by the general directives indicated in His Word, using our

common sense to evaluate what He, in His wisdom, provides. Our decisions, contrary to the certainty of Jesus' call to Peter, will be far less certain, and about which we must be far more humble and cautious.

**14:30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me.** We too, must severely count the cost of our decision to undertake the impossible with Jesus, before bouncing out of our relative security into the arena of His activity. We may not be able to foresee certain dangers and threats before they arrive, but the relative certainty that we **MUST** face them should forearm us to concentrate our attention and fix our dependence upon Jesus as we leap out to join Him. In fact, it was when Peter shifted his confidence from Jesus to his own frail powers that he went down. But risk we must, if we would attempt great projects for the Lord. But we must be assured that we are doing His bidding and not our own. Nevertheless, all our boldness will be to no avail, if after having dared the impossible in the name of Jesus in obedience to His call, our underlying confidence shifts from Him to human means and strength.

**14:31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him, and saith unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?** The confidence in Jesus to dare great things for God is limited only by our concentration upon Him as the source of our power. All our activities for Him in this present age must be done out of confidence in His wisdom and might. Otherwise, nothing can be dared, or what is dared fails, because the bold ones, no less believers in Jesus than before, like Peter, place their confidence in anything else but Him. But thank God for the mercifulness of a Lord that restores our sagging strength and substitutes our misplaced confidence, and causes us to stand once again as we call upon Him!

#### C. PEACE AND JOY IN HIS PRESENCE:

**14:32 And when they were gone up into the boat, the wind ceased.** In answers to prayers, even now He comes to calm temporary storms. One day His majestic presence and lordly power will eliminate **ALL** that curses, He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for these former things have passed away!

**14:33 And they that were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.** In the same way that this

deliverance from a raging sea convinced the Twelve even more of Jesus' divine identity than the miraculous multiplication of food for the 5000 in relative calm, sometimes rescue from sure death speaks more convincingly of God's power, divinity and tender care to the menaced person than even His more spectacular works seem to those who think themselves in no immediate danger.

Though now we walk by faith, living on hope, believing that Jesus will come to our rescue, one day He will! Worlds afire, the elements aflame, the whole thing ready to blow . . . , and Jesus will appear to take His own to eternal safety. That will be a glorious moment when we can rejoice and throw ourselves at His feet in willing worship, confessing: "Lord, you really are God's Son!"

#### CONCLUSION:

Let us even now row against the wind and waves of our lives until we drop, not giving in to any of the temptations to give up and coast with the current!

Let us continue, whether He rescues us personally and miraculously in this life or not!

Let us continue to long for, and look for, His glorious coming when His omnipotent word will guarantee our eternal security, and His personal presence will assure our inexpressable joy and imperturbable peace with Him forever!

### Section 35

#### JESUS HEALS SOME SICK AT GENNESARET

(Parallel: Mark 6:53-56)

TEXT: 14:34-36

34 And when they had crossed over, they came to the land, unto Gennesaret. 35 And when the men of that place knew him, they sent into all that region round about, and brought unto him all that were sick; 36 and they besought him that they might only touch the border of his garment: and as many as touched were made whole.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Jesus' original purpose for the disciples was that they sail for Bethsaida near Capernaum. How is it that they disembark so far south of that city?
- b. If Jesus had already performed so many miracles of healing in the general area of Gennesaret, how do you account for this report of so many people needing to be healed?
- c. What evidence of generosity do you discover in the inhabitants of Gennesaret shown in what they did?
- d. Why do you suppose they chose the particular method by which they would be healed, i.e., why touch only the border of His robe?
- e. Matthew reports that "as many as touched" were healed. Does he mean to imply that there were others who did not come to Jesus? Did Jesus ever heal each and every diseased person in any single area of Palestine? If not, why not? If so, how do you know this?
- f. Do you think the Apostles helped Jesus with the healing done at this time? Or did they let Jesus do all the work of healing? If they did help Jesus, what is your proof that they did? If they did not, why do you think they did not? What was their relationship to Jesus at this moment, in contrast to their work during their own first evangelistic tour in Galilee?
- g. What do these miracles prove about Jesus?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

When Jesus and His Apostles had crossed over the Sea of Galilee, they beached at the plain of Gennesaret, mooring the boat at the shore. When they disembarked, at once the people recognized Jesus. The men of that area ran through the entire neighborhood to bring to Him all the sick people on their pallets to any spot where they heard He was. Wherever He went, whether in villages, cities or in the countryside, they laid their sick in the market places, begging Him that they might only touch the fringe of His garment. And as many as touched it were healed.

## SUMMARY

Although it had been Jesus' order to sail for Bethsaida near Capernaum after the feeding of the five thousand, the strong north-westerly winds had blown the Apostles further south, so that shortly after Jesus boarded the boat, they beached at Gennesaret. They were recognized at once by the local people who began collecting their sick along the road Jesus must travel. He healed them all, as He made His way to Capernaum.

## INTRODUCTION

WHY INCLUDE THIS SECTION AND  
OMIT THE CLIMAX AND COLLAPSE?

As a matter of fact Matthew and Mark pass over in silence the stunning rejection of Jesus' spiritual mission by the crowds that abandoned Him after the Capernaum discourse on the Bread of Life. (Jn. 6:25-66) It would hardly be thought likely that BOTH Matthew and Mark ("the interpreter of Peter") should have neglected to describe an event that must have tested their personal loyalty to the limit. Unfriendly commentators see this section as "just one of Matthew's almost colourless little connecting passages" with no definite connection with his general presentation of the Messiah:

After a few, brief summary verses (34-36), composed on the model of those which we found in 4:23-25 and in 9:35, we find the discussion with the Pharisees and the specialists in the law, placed here because it belongs to the section on the bread.

This comment by Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 220), while reducing our text to a brief summation serving only a literary function, ignores the true, historico-theological editing by Matthew. His purpose is not to fill space nor simply to indicate chronological connections at this point. The very fact that two major eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry (Matthew and Peter, if we may presume to include his message as standing back of Mark's Gospel) produce a version different that a third major eyewitness (John), a version which does not contradict the other two in any detail, should lead the reader to expect a difference in evaluations on the part of the witnesses, which, in fact, we have here.



Edersheim (*Life*, II, 6-36) takes the view that Matthew and Mark approach the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry from quite another angle than that of John. Whereas John deals with the critical message that widened the crevice between Jesus and the *multitudes*, Matthew and Mark deal with the critical position taken by Jesus that deepened the abyss between Himself and the *champions of Jewish orthodoxy*, the Pharisees. Edersheim endeavors, then, to harmonize the two presentations quite tightly, concluding that the reproof of the religious leaders (Mt. 15; Mk. 7) preceded the Discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn. 6). However, even a looser harmonization than he produces would still permit us to consider Mt. 15 and Mk. 7 as those Evangelists' treatment of Jesus' deliberate conclusion of His popular ministry in Galilee. That is, even if we place the attack of the Pharisees as occurring after the Passover and return of the pilgrims to Galilee, or about two weeks after the feeding of the 5000 and the scandalous Bread of Life discourse, it could still be considered as the *coup de grace* of Jesus' popularity.

On this basis, then, we may sense that Matthew and Mark intend only to omit the clash of popular views with those of Jesus, in order to illustrate the collision between Jewish official doctrine and the spiritual nature of Jesus' doctrinal position. In effect, then, these two Evangelists do actually include the climax and collapse of Jesus' popular ministry. If so, then what role does this present section play in their outline?

1. This section, when coupled with the following clash with the Pharisees (Mt. 15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23) gives the impression that, while Jesus intended to sift the superficial from the serious followers (see Notes at 14:13b), He did not ever intend to "turn off" the mercy of God from anyone. Rather, He kept right on showing men that God cared about them in practical ways. Thus Matthew and Mark, in this vivid scene at Gennesaret, clarify Jesus' position before they record His verbal broad-sides levelled at the Pharisees' representation of traditional orthodoxy.
2. This impression is heightened if we consider the pathos of the scene before us. Here Jesus appears only as a Healer of the sick. There is not even a suggestion that these healings were possibly accompanied by teaching. Other considerations would easily explain this absence of instruction, as for example, Jesus' haste to return to Capernaum to strike the final blow to His popular following before Herod Antipas could effectively move to hinder Him,

or perhaps He wanted to deliver the Bread of Life sermon before the people left for the Passover at Jerusalem, or in order to begin the private Training of the Twelve so much sooner, or in order to avoid the continuation, by a popular ministry in Gennesaret, of the very thing He must now bring to a close. Nevertheless, the sensitive reader can probably sense the grim fact that something is amiss, even in reasonably tranquil Gennesaret, because Jesus does not pause to teach this generous, solicitous folk. Why does He keep moving, pausing only long enough to cure this or that sick one and move steadily on to Capernaum? (Cf. Jn. 6:24, 25, 29)

3. Is it possible that Matthew is pushing forward a theme he introduced earlier in his gospel? (Cf. Mt. 8:17; 12:18-21) Jesus is the healing Servant of Jehovah who moves steadily toward victory while steadfastly avoiding riots and demagoguery, mercifully helping the weak and making truth and righteousness to triumph. He could easily have avoided the Gennesarenes by ordering an immediate sailing to Capernaum without going overland and risking the loss of valuable time. Psychologically, then, Matthew's presentation is essential to the overall picture of the Messiah, because he inks in this detail of Christ's merciful kindness, before he sketches His terrible judgment of Phariseism and rabbinical tradition.
4. The apologetic value of this miniature lies in its presentation of one more grand proof of Jesus' right to reveal God's message to the Jewish people, hence all the more reason why they should listen to Him, even if He turns immediately thereafter to cut official orthodoxy to pieces.
5. Then, conversely, the reader who reflects upon this scene and the one following, could appreciate the absolute sterility of Pharisean ideals when thrown into contrast with the concrete, down-to-earth practical human kindness exemplified by Jesus who continued showing the love of God to people who desired Him all too often for what they could get out of Him. The miserable helplessness of the Pharisees makes a striking antithesis to the vibrantly alive, openly caring and morally alert personal godliness of Jesus of Nazareth! No sooner did the Lord appear than people began to come to Him as a magnetic source of Life and Power; no sooner did the Pharisees begin to teach than the Law became an intolerable burden. Joy in righteousness began to drain out of even the simplest acts of life. (See Notes on 15:1-20.) The reader cannot miss the implication: righteousness is not something abstract and

purely philosophical, but a message believed and acted upon that brings with it happiness, harmony, and healing to the soul, if not also to the body. And it is to be found in Jesus, not embalmed in tradition nor debated among the rabbis.

## NOTES

14:34 **And when they had crossed over** is Matthew's way of concluding the incident where Jesus walked on the water, not an independent introduction to an unrelated section. John's conclusion to the same event reads:

Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going, (Jn. 6:21; cf. Note at Mt. 14:32)

This arrangement is better than Lenski's arguments for placing this event after the Bread of Life Sermon, because the most natural connections indicated by Matthew and Mark suggest the natural conclusion of the overnight boat trip from the east side of the lake. *Diaperào* means "to cross over."

Cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 186; Rocci, 459, while admitting an extended sense: "to go through" in a figurative sense, however gives "to pass across, to traverse, to cross, to ferry from one bank to the other" as the literal meaning.

After the crossing they moored to the shore at Gennesaret. (Mk. 6:53) Lenski's view demands too much not in the text: (1) a supposed landing at Capernaum after the walking on the water, although John's remark (6:21) that they arrived "at the land to which they were going" need not mean "Capernaum," as opposed to "Gennesaret," but "Galilee," as opposed to "Gaulonitis"; (2) the Bread of Life Discourse after which most of Jesus' followers left Him; (3) an unrecorded sailing to Gennesaret, because Lenski used the aorist participles (*diaperàsantes*: "crossed over") to cover the trip to Capernaum, leaving the sailing to Gennesaret unrecorded in Scripture. (4) Then, because the collapse at Capernaum is thought to have occurred first, the enthusiastic reception at Gennesaret, only a few miles south, is strangely inexplicable except on the supposition that Jesus had never been there and the Gennesarenes completely out of touch with events at Capernaum. The facts are more easily

harmonized as follows:

1. Jesus walked on the water to the boat in mid-lake; called Peter to Him; walked with him back to the boat. The wind dropped (He calmed it?) and in no time at all the boat arrived on the west side of the lake. (Mt. 14:24-33; Mk. 6:47-52; Jn. 6:19-21)
2. The crossing concluded (*diaperàsantes*), Jesus and the Twelve find themselves immediately at the shore on the Gennesar Plain and moored the boat there. (Mk. 6:53)
3. Immediately recognized upon disembarking, Jesus walked through the Gennesaret region, healing as He went. (Mt. 14:35f; Mk. 6:54-56)
4. He gradually made His way to Capernaum where He concluded His teaching in the synagogue. (Jn. 6:59)
5. Later—how much later no text informs us,—Jesus was attacked by the Pharisees from Jerusalem. (Mt. 15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23) Ederheim makes an interesting case for reversing these latter two items. (*Life*, II, 6-36)

On this view the enthusiasm of the Gennesarenes and the tolerant attitude of Jesus are perfectly explicable, because He had not yet so forcefully, nor so publicly, declared that crucial position that eventually ruined His public image in the minds of His superficial disciples.

**They came to the land, unto Gennesaret.** The boat came into port (*prosormisthesan*) presumably early in the morning after the night voyage across. The Plain of Gennesaret is located on the west side of the Galilean lake about two and a half miles south of the Capernaum-Bethsaida area, the original destination Jesus ordered the Apostles to reach when they sailed the day before. This coming to land so far south of their intended goal suggests that the wind they fought during the night blew out of the north-north-west. On the other hand, it might be rightly objected that after Jesus calmed the storm, they could have rowed (or sailed) to any destination He then chose. If so, it is interesting that He should have chosen Gennesaret: was it simply the closer shore? After breakfast did He desire to make good use of His time while deliberately staying away from Capernaum during at least the morning hours, in order to give people adequate time to collect back into Capernaum for the final show-down in the synagogue there?

*Gennesaret* is glowingly described by Josephus (*Wars*, III, 10, 8) in a paragraph that would do honors to the local tourism office of

the Gennesaret Chamber of Commerce. The plain itself is about 3.7 miles long and 2.5 miles wide, but its fertility and fruitfulness more than compensate for its diminutive area. On its southeast corner was located the village of Magdala, the home of Mary the Magdalene. Was the woman whom Jesus healed of the hemorrhage also from this area? (See on 9:20-22; and note on 14:36.)

**14:35 And when the men of that place knew him**, i.e., immediately recognized Him as soon as they disembarked (Mk. 6:54), they sprang into action. Their attention would have been drawn originally perhaps by the fishing boat full, not of fish, but of men. Upon closer investigation, they recognize Him who could bring instant aid to all their sick. The decision and instantaneousness of their reaction is perfectly understandable on the supposition that:

1. they had known Him from contacts with Him up at Capernaum, if He had never come to Gennesaret before;
2. they had their mind firmly decided upon this course of action in the event He should ever pass this way;
3. His arrival only triggered their reaction.

**They sent into all that region round about and brought unto him all that were sick.** Mark (6:55f) emphasizes the extensiveness of their preparations:

They ran about the whole neighborhood and began to bring sick people on their pallets to any place where they heard he was. And wherever he came—in villages, cities or country—they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him. . . .

Because the precise sequence of events from this point to the end of the Sermon on the Bread of Life and the Attack of the Jerusalem Pharisees is difficult to establish, we may assume that the urgency of these Gennesaret events is not based upon any declared intention of Jesus to be in Capernaum for the day, unless, in some unrecorded statement of His, He had warned them to hurry because of His scheduled stop in Capernaum. If Mark's language, that speaks of a considerable healing ministry, seems too elaborate for one day's activity, as if Jesus needed to spend more than one day in the Gennesaret area to accomplish all that is here affirmed, it must be remembered that John did not specify that the people found Jesus on the day following the miracle of the loaves. We merely interpret it so. (Jn. 6:22, 25) John may not have intended the tight chronological connection we think we see. However, Mark's language is

not objectively overstating the case, because, by planning His itinerary carefully, Jesus could well have worked His way through lots of people all the way from Magdala, at the south end of the Gennesaret Plain, clear to Capernaum, two and a half miles north of it, arriving at the synagogue in time for His decisive sermon on the Bread of Life,—all on the same day.

What a contrast distinguishes the Gennesarenes from the Gerasenes, their neighbors on the opposite side of the Galilean Lake! Whereas the latter, upon His arrival there, fearfully rushed Jesus away (see on Mt. 8:28-34), the inhabitants of Gennesaret joyfully welcomed Him. The Gerasenes felt no need of the Lord; the men of Gennesaret not only recognized their own deep need, but also that of their sick folks at home. Mark's language suggests that the Lord made a loop through the villages and towns in the Gennesaret area, making His way to Capernaum. Because His route was more or less clear to the local people, they could more easily run ahead of Him and anticipate His approach to a given point and assemble their sick there.

**14:36 And they besought him that they might only touch the border of his garment.** What a contrast distinguishes the men of Gennesaret and the Nazarenes, their inland compatriots to the west! Whereas the latter were so totally indifferent to Jesus as not even to trust Him enough to ask Him to bring merciful healing to their people (see on 13:54-58), Gennesaret's people gratefully rushed as many infirm people as possible to every possible point they imagined He would pass!

What a contrast between these people of Gennesaret and the woman healed at Capernaum when *she touched the border of His garment*: these men openly requested Jesus' permission but she did not and had to be called from hiding to open discipleship and blessing. (See notes on 9:20-22.) The amazing request that they be permitted to touch His garment is the more curious, because nowhere else is it recorded that so many people desired that they be allowed to use this method to contact His power. Is it possible that news of the healing of the woman in Capernaum a short distance north of here encouraged them to request that they too be permitted to do so likewise? (Cf. by contrast Mk. 3:10; Mt. 8:8) Their magnificent respect for the Lord manifests itself, as Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 208) said it so succinctly: They approach Him

with great humility; they came to him as those that were sensible

of their distance, humbly beseeching him to help them; and their desiring to touch the hem of his garment, intimates that they thought themselves unworthy that he should take any particular notice of them, that he should so much as speak to their case, much less touch them for their cure; but they will look upon it as a great favour, if he will give them leave to *touch but the hem of his garment*. . . . With great assurance of the all-sufficiency of his power, not doubting but that they should be healed, even by touching the hem of his garment; that they receive abundant communications from him by the smallest token or symbol of communion with him. They did not expect the formality of striking his hand over the place or persons diseased, as Naaman did (2 Kings 5:11); but they were sure that there was in him such an overflowing fulness of healing virtue, that they could not fail of a cure, who were but admitted near him.

In light of these suggestions, it is probably too low a view of their confidence in Jesus to affirm that their choice of the garment-hem by which to contact His power indicates an "imperfect faith."

**As many as touched were made whole.** It is important to remember here that the modern expression: "We are but touching the hem of the garment" has nothing essential in common with this story, because that expression means to imply that "we are only beginning to tap the potentiality of something." There is no connection between that notion and this story, because the people of Gennesaret experienced the full total cleansing, healing power of God by that touch, because theirs was a touch of humble, expectant, trusting faith! There is no indication whatever in the text that they would have been more greatly blessed, or would have tapped greater spiritual resources, if they had touched Jesus somewhere else, or approached Him in some other fashion. From this standpoint, Jesus granted their request with the same generosity with which He responded to Peter's spontaneous proposal to come to Him on the water. His permission must not be construed as the superior condescension to ignorance and superstition, as if they thought His tassels to possess some magical power. It is, rather, His friendly bending to an enlightened request made in a climate of confidence. Who would not want to work with people like that? But these very open-hearted people will stand out in sharp contrast with the beady-eyed, narrow-minded, small-souled Pharisees and their selfish, contracted religion in the next section.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What major events precede this incident?
2. What major sermon follows this incident?
3. How had Jesus and His disciples come to Gennesaret?
4. Locate the plain of Gennesaret and describe it.
5. Analyze the attitude of the inhabitants of this area toward Jesus.
6. How many people did Jesus heal in this area?
7. What method of healing did the people themselves prefer that He use?
8. Trace the general travel plan of Jesus from the time He left the Capernaum area by boat until He returned there. (Jn. 6:59)

## EXPOSITORY SERMON:

## "JESUS CAME TO OUR TOWN"

## 1. THE DEPTH OF OUR NEED (v. 35)

- A. Gennesaret, however fertile, however fruitful, could not assuage the grief and heal the sick with its choicest food within their reach! Environment, however fine, is not everything!
- B. So, upon His disembarking in our country we recognized Him.
  1. We recognized that our day of opportunity had come.
  2. Jesus had evangelized elsewhere in Galilee, but this was His first real visit, and perhaps His last, in Gennesaret, for all we knew, so we must seize the moment.
  3. Application: Jesus was recognized because He was known; He was trusted and appealed to, because He was known. Men will be able to appeal to Him only to the extent that they know Him. If His disciples neglect to make Him known, how can men call upon Him? (Ro. 10:14-17)
- C. Our men spread the good word that the Great Healer had come to our land.
  1. We knew that Jesus' power was great enough to be shared with all.
  2. We chose not to monopolize Jesus on the beach, but share Him in the neighborhood.
  3. Unselfishly and quickly, our sick were assembled along His route in order not to have to ask Him to turn aside for anyone.



4. Application: If you have tested the goodness and power of Christ, you too will want to take the trouble to share that goodness with everyone around you, bringing them to Him to be saved. We can show no better love to our own people than by opening up to them all the benefits of the knowledge and power of Christ!

## II. THE TRUSTING HUMILITY OF OUR APPROACH (v. 36a)

- A. We brought nothing to Jesus when we let Him know of our need:
  1. No external inducements were offered Him, except the reality and extent of our need, to stir His compassion.
  2. No certificates of faithful attendance at synagogue were offered as proof of our worthiness—those who approach this holy Lord must do so out of real humility!
  3. We made no appeals to His pride; ours was an appeal to His mercy and an appeal that was fully confident of and totally dependent upon His power.
  4. We offered Him no money: what earthly treasure could we pay to equal the value received when He turned the miraculous power of God to bless and heal us?
- B. All we sought was the privilege to bring our sick into contact with His power.
- C. Application: This is the only approach acceptable to Jesus Christ: we have no righteousness worth mentioning and must depend entirely upon His grace!

## III. THE SIMPLICITY OF HIS METHOD: a mere touch of the tassel on His robe! (v. 36)

- A. We knew that there was no particular efficacy in the robe itself, but in the Lord whose robe it was.
- B. What an amazing condescension to the desires of this humble people!
- C. This request is the more astonishing because of its universality: was the woman who had been healed earlier of the twelve-year hemorrhage from this area? (See on 9:20-22.) At any rate, had news of her healing encouraged these people to request that they too be permitted, in faith, to touch His tassel?
- D. Application: While we should beware of mindless imitation of the formal patterns of someone else's successful approaches to Christ, yet their experiences can be valuable encouragement to

us too. We may well make use of those methods of devotion which others before us have found so rewarding, i.e., Bible reading, regular prayer, fasting, giving, etc. Even so, we must choose among those means He has promised to honor, if we would come to Him and be blessed. Nevertheless, we must never despise even the humblest approach: some must look upon a brazen serpent to live, others must paint blood on doorposts, others must be immersed in water, others touched His garment, but all who did were blessed. And those who did not?

#### IV. THE COMPLETENESS OF HIS RESULTS (v. 36b)

- A. The sick were universally healed;
  - 1. There were none who were given only temporary relief.
  - 2. There were none whose complaint was rejected as too difficult for Jesus to correct.
  - 3. There were none who went away hopeless, saying He could not help them.
- B. All were thoroughly cured: Jesus stopped nothing short of banishing all existing sickness out of our land in the case of everyone brought to Him!
- C. Application: He who can miraculously heal the body proves by that act that He can save our souls too. (Cf. Mt. 9:6; 12:28; 11:2-5) If a word or a touch can heal our bodies, our trust in His powerful word can bring healing to our sin-sick spirit, if we but earnestly turn to Him to request and so receive His gracious blessing! (Phil. 1:6) If He can save the chief of sinners, He can save the tribe! (1 Ti. 1:15, 16) "He is able to save for all time those who come to God through Him!" (Heb. 7:25; 2 Co. 5:21)

#### CONCLUSION:

In that day of judgment, will the men of Gennesaret stand up and condemn our generation, for they graciously and gladly brought their sick to the great Physician, whereas we could bring our friends and neighbors to the Prince of Life, so that they may have eternal salvation, but we have not done it? Are we consistently anxious for the whole neighborhood to have the joy of preparation for Jesus' coming to our world?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

- Section 36. Jesus Debates With Jerusalem Pharisees about the Elders' Traditions (15:1-20)
- Section 37. Jesus Liberates Syrophoenician Woman's Daughter (15:21-28)
- Section 38. Jesus Feeds 4000 and Heals Many of Decapolis (15:29-39)

## STUDY OUTLINE

- I. JESUS DEBATES WITH JERUSALEM PHARISEES ABOUT THE ELDERS' TRADITIONS (15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23)
- A. The attack led by the Pharisees (Mt. 15:1f; Mk. 7:1-5): "You break our rules!"
  - B. Jesus counterattacks (Mt. 15:3-20; Mk. 7:6-23)
    - 1. Before the Pharisees themselves (15:3-9; Mk. 7:6-13): "You break God's Law to keep your rules!"
    - 2. Before the multitudes (15:10f; Mk. 7:14-17): "Real defilement is not external, but spiritual!"
    - 3. Before the disciples privately (Mt. 15:12-20; Mk. 7:17-23):
      - a. "Human tradition does not possess God's authority, so will finally be eradicated."
      - b. "Nothing eaten affects the soul; defilement proceeds from an unregenerate heart."
      - c. "Sin defiles man like no ceremonies, foods or other externals ever could."
- II. JESUS LIBERATES A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S DAUGHTER (15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30)
- A. Situation: Jesus desires privacy (Mt. 15:21; Mk. 7:24)
  - B. The Request by faith (15:22; Mk. 7:25f)
    - 1. She came out of the depth of her distress.
    - 2. She came despite the distinct disadvantages of her position.
    - 3. She came despite her meager knowledge of Jesus.
  - C. The Relentlessness of faith (15:23-27; Mk. 7:27f)
    - 1. Her resolution undaunted by Jesus' seeming indifference.
    - 2. Her resilience seen in her steady good humor despite desperation

3. Her reserve seen in her proper humility.  
 D. The Rewarding of faith (15:28; Mk. 7:29f)

### III. JESUS FEEDS 4000 AND HEALS MANY OF DECAPOLIS (15:29-39; Mk. 7:31—8:10)

- A. Situation: Journey through Decapolis from Tyre and Sidon to Lake Galilee (Mt. 15:29; Mk. 7:31)  
 B. Many miracles of healing (Mt. 15:30f; Mk. 7:32-37)  
 C. Jesus feeds the 4000 (Mt. 15:32-39; Mk. 8:1-10)

## Section 36

### JESUS DEBATES WITH JERUSALEM PHARISEES ABOUT THE ELDERS' TRADITIONS

(Parallel: Mark 7:1-23)

TEXT: 15:1-20

1 Then there come to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes, saying, 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

3 And he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? 4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of thy father or mother, let him die the death. 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is given *to God*; 6 he shall not honor his father. And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition.

7 Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,

8 This people honoreth me with their lips;

But their heart is far from me.

9 But in vain do they worship me,

Teaching *as their* doctrines the precepts of men.

10 And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: 11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.

12 Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying?

13 But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up. 14 Let them alone: they are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.

15 And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.

16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding? 17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? 18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: 20 these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not the man.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How can we distinguish good traditions from bad ones?
- b. Why were there scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem here in Galilee? What was their purpose for prowling around so far from home, precisely at this time and place?
- c. It is a matter of observable fact that the disciples of Jesus did in fact eat with defiled hands. Why do you think they did this? Do you think the multitudes ceremoniously washed their hands before eating the bread and fish miraculously provided by Jesus? Why did not Jesus insist on their washing their hands?
- d. John 7:1 says that about this time "Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him." This very clearly was the time of the Passover (Jn. 6:4). Does John mean to suggest that Jesus Himself did not attend the Passover feast in Jerusalem? If so, what does this reveal about Jesus? If not, what do the available facts mean? Did Jesus, as God in the flesh, need to attend such feasts, commanded for all Jews, even though He Himself was Hebrew? Or, to put it another way, does Jesus violate Mosaic Law as well as the traditions of the elders?
- e. If you take the view that Jesus did not attend the feast, because for good and sufficient reasons He was exempt from attendance, do you think that He would keep the Apostles away from the Passover? If so, why? If not, why not?
- f. At what point, do you think, does tradition make void the commands of God, or make worship "vain"? Use the illustration in

the text to help you formulate your answer.

- g. Jesus called the Pharisees "hypocrites." Wherein did their hypocrisy lie?
- h. Do you think that what had been declared "Corban" was actually given to God? That is what the word means, but did the children really turn it over to God? What is your opinion?
- i. What do you think the command "Honor your father and mother" includes? Did Jesus Himself honor His own earthly parents in this way? If so, when or how?
- j. Do you think that Isaiah had the Pharisees in mind when he penned the words quoted by Jesus in reference to them? If not, how could Jesus affirm: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you"? If so, what is the message intended for the people of Isaiah's own day?
- k. Can you explain why a religion, or worship, based on human commandments is useless?
- l. Can false religious teaching or religious leaders with faulty ideas actually lead sincere followers to destruction? Is not sincerity a sufficient safeguard against that eventuality?
- m. But, all that the Pharisees and scribes were doing for the Jewish people was interpret the Mosaic Law and the prophets for them, so that they could know God's will. Do you think it is right, then, to interpret the Scriptures for other people?
- n. Explain how BOTH of the following mottos would have helped to prevent the Pharisees from making the mistakes of which Jesus accused them:
  - (1) "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."
  - (2) "Where the Scriptures speak, we are silent.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we speak."

Do not choke on this second expression of the same profound truth! Study it to see its genius, then show how both propositions would have helped even the Pharisees to handle God's Word more worthily.
- o. Do you think Jesus could contradict Old Testament teaching by the principles He espoused? If so, how could He do that—had the OT been wrong? If not, then how is His teaching in this section to be understood?
- p. Were the Apostles being defiled according to the OT Law when they ate without washing?
- q. According to the principles of Jesus, does ANYTHING, either eaten or drunk, ever defile a person? If so, what? If not, why not?

- r. Would you drink blood or eat things strangled, i.e., with the blood in it, or any food made with blood? Why? (Cf. Ac. 15:20, 29)
- s. Why should the disciples be so concerned about how Jesus talks about the opinions of the learned Pharisees?
- t. What, do you think, is the relative responsibility before God of a "blind guide" and a "blind follower"? Is one more responsible than the other, or are both equally guilty? Are they equally lost?
- u. Does it really matter much whether one is defiled by what comes out of the heart? Are you personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of God? What does defilement mean to you?
- v. Why could not the disciples understand the teaching Jesus gave regarding the true source of defilement, i.e., what factors would have hindered their grasping His meaning immediately?
- w. Can you explain why the Law of Moses contained such regulations about defilement by eating or touching certain things which the New Testament definitely and clearly allows? Did God change His mind in the meantime?
- x. What is so earth-shaking, from a religious standpoint, about Mark's inserted comment (7:19): "Thus He declared all foods clean"?
- y. Is Jesus defending as "clean" food or drink that would be destructive to the human body? In what sense are we to understand Mark's word "all foods"? What about foods to which one is allergic? What about foods or drink which leave one stuffed or drunk?
- z. Is Jesus teaching us to tolerate others more than the Pharisees did, or to reject and condemn such unscriptural practices in religion like theirs?
- aa. If Jesus is more concerned about the condition of a man's heart, why does he pointedly list so many outward manifestations of what He calls real defilement, or sin? Why does He still list murder as defiling, when He is really concerned about the hate that prompts it, for example?
- bb. Is pride always wrong? How and when does it defile a man?
- cc. What kind(s) of foolishness defile a person?
- dd. Why list three kinds of sexual sins: fornication, adultery and lasciviousness? Are they not all sexual sins? What is the difference between them?
- ee. If the Pharisees were able to pervert a God-given religion like Judaism, what are our chances of twisting a beautiful relationship with God like Christianity into something that Jesus Himself would

not be able to recognize? What if we have already made this fatal switch? What remedy is open to us to correct whatever is false or perverted in our religion, in order to bring ourselves back to Jesus' original plans for His people? A more important question is: what are the unchanging marks of true religion whereby we can judge ourselves and recognize the degree of truth or falsity in our religion?

- ff. What is the psychological danger in that unsound compensation made by an individual who deliberately sets aside a commandment of God, because it does not suit him to observe it, and then thinks he can make up for it by being extra careful about something else? The Pharisees were past masters at this sort of dodging their moral responsibility. Do you know any Pharisees in your circle of acquaintances? What do you think about people who preach a lot about baptism but ignore Jesus' orders to evangelize the whole world? What about Christians who are especially punctilious about the form of baptism, but are not especially bothered by the selfishness and indifference to others' needs seen among their members?
- gg. Do you think the Pharisees brought this question to Jesus because they hated sin, or because they simply hated to see any of their opinions or traditional views discounted or put in doubt? Why do you bring up objections in a discussion of religion or morality? Is it because you hate sin, love sinners and long to save them from the consequences of a false philosophy, or do you bring up arguments in order to bolster your confidence in the views and conclusions held by some revered teacher in your acquaintance? Are you a Pharisee?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

A group of Pharisees, along with some doctors of the law who had come up from Jerusalem, approached Jesus. They noticed that some of His disciples ate their meals with "defiled" hands—in other words, without washing them in the ceremonial way. (In fact, the Pharisees and the Jews in general never eat unless they have washed their hands in a particular way, following an old, established tradition. It is their practice never to eat anything upon returning from the market place until they have sprinkled themselves for ceremonial purification. There are many other points which they consider essential on which they have a traditional rule to maintain, for example, the immersing



of cups, jugs and copper basins.) Accordingly, the Pharisees and lawyers challenged Jesus, "Why do your disciples not follow the ancient tradition, but eat their food with 'defiled' hands? In fact, they do not wash their hands when they eat."

Jesus answered them, "And what about you? You have a fine way of rejecting and breaking God's clear commandment in order to keep your tradition! Because God, speaking through Moses (Ex. 20:12; Dt. 5:16), commanded: 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who reviles his parents must die.' (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9) But you say, 'If a person tells his parents, Anything of mine which might have been used for your benefit is now vowed to God,' then you permit them no longer to do anything for their parents. And so, by your man-made rule, you render God's direct command null and void. This is typical of your procedure! You hypocrites: Isaiah (29:13) beautifully described your kind when he said:

"These people say they honor me;  
But their heart is somewhere else.  
When they worship me, they are wasting their time,  
Since they just teach men's ideas for divine law.' "

Then Jesus called the people around Him again and exhorted them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand this: there is no defilement so damaging in what one eats as that moral contamination involved in what one says or does!"

Later, when Jesus had gone indoors, leaving the people outside, the disciples approached Him with the question, "Do you realize that you have horrified the Pharisees with this sort of talk?"

His answer was: "Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be pulled up by the roots; so ignore them! They are blind guides leading the blind: anyone who follows them will fall into a pit with them!"

But Peter demanded, "Explain what you meant by that enigma."

Jesus responded, "Are you all also still unable to grasp this? Do you not understand that what you eat will not harm your soul, because food does not come into contact with your innermost being, but simply passes through your digestive system and out again?"

(By saying this, Jesus declared all foods kosher or ceremonially pure.)

He went on: "But what a man says, comes from his soul. This is what really pollutes a man. For from within the man, out of his own

mind, arise evil thoughts like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander, greed, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, arrogance and folly. These things come from within a man's mind. These are the things which make a man unfit for God, but there is no defilement in eating without first washing your hands according to some ceremonial ritual!"

### SUMMARY

After the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry, He was attacked more vigorously by the Jewish authorities on the basis of His failure to demand that His followers obey the traditions of the fathers. He counterattacked by pointing out the fundamental danger in following human tradition at all: it can very easily take precedence over clear commands of God. Further, human tradition leads people into a useless worship based upon what are thought to be God's commands when they have only human authority for their practice. The specific charge of the Pharisees and theologians was a clear case of exaggeratedly externalized ceremonialism. Jesus counters by showing with undeniable clarity that real religion is that of the heart, and that the real defilement or pollution is that of the heart and soul of a man, not merely of his body. The nervous disciples feared the consequences of Jesus' severe teaching upon the Pharisees. Jesus retorted that the Pharisees' ideas were, after all, of human origin and worthless, but dangerous enough to destroy both the blind leader as well as all who blindly follow him. When the Twelve asked for further clarification, Jesus patiently explained that eating *per se* is a purely physical process that leaves the soul totally unaffected. Contrarily, the products of a man's mind, the expression of his wrong desires, in short, his sins, really corrupt a man.

### NOTES

#### A. THE ATTACK LED BY THE PHARISEES:

"You break our rules!"

15:1 **Then:** because the Synoptic writers' time-connections are difficult to ascertain with precision, we are limited to the supposition that this attack took place while Jesus was in Galilee sometime either

before or after the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4 in connection with the feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps the exciting rumors about the feeding of the 5000 men had been spread around at that feast in Jerusalem, spurring the national leaders to move decisively to block Jesus' mounting popularity and theological influence. **There came to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes:** this fact harmonizes well with John's comment (7:1): "After this (the feeding of the 5000 and the Sermon on the Bread of Life preached at Capernaum) Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him."

Whether or not John means to imply that Jesus did not attend the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4, is not clear, because the Apostle uses *peripateîn*: "to walk around, to circulate in an area," perhaps in the sense of evangelistic tours in Judea. However, he may be implying that Jesus actually attended the feast, merely mingling with these masses rather than doing any attention-getting public teaching and miracles. (See Arndt-Gingrich, 654.) Nothing positive is affirmed about whether Jesus hindered the Twelve from attending the feast, if He himself remained in Galilee. There is wisdom in avoiding a fatal conclusion of one's ministry when he who does so knows there is yet work to do. He told the Twelve: "When persecuted in one town, flee to the next" (Mt. 10:23). When the time came, Jesus did not avoid death. There is a day to flee and a day to die. See Thought Questions d. and e. for further problems involved in this question. The Synoptic Gospels record the travels (cf. John's *peripateîn en tē Galilaïa*) Jesus took during the period between the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles that year, a period which perhaps began with Jesus' debate with the Pharisees in this chapter.

**From Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes** is significant, because, whereas every city of Jewish population had its Pharisees from almost every walk of life, these guardians of righteousness stir forth from the capital with their own theologians in tow. However, this is not the first time these bloodhounds trail Him. (Cf. Mk. 3:22; Lk. 5:17) Pharisean views were popularly held, because these rabbis, as Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 31) observes,

... went as far as possible to make Torah practicable for all the people, but they nevertheless insisted ultimately on the observance of Torah. The people welcomed the assistance of the Hakamim

[i.e., scholars] in alleviating the strictest interpretations of Torah and in defending their traditional ways, but many of them were by no means prepared to submit their lives to the whole detail of Torah . . .

Bowker (*ibid.* 30) also notices the tension existing between the scholars and the common people who by no means necessarily went all the way to accept every detail of scholarly interpretation in their own lives. Since it was the scholars' design to define the Law so that, theoretically, ordinary people could actually achieve a condition of holiness as defined in the Law, and since they extended their influence over the people through education in the synagogues whereby their exegesis and applications of the Law molded the popular mind, naturally, any evidence of weakening or lowering of the traditional interpretations or standards would be viewed by the Pharisees as an instant threat to the holiness of Israel. As our text will amply demonstrate, Jesus posed a grave menace to the Pharisees on the following grounds:

1. He ignored tradition as a question of conscience. This is no small issue, since, as Bowker (*ibid.* 17f, emphasis added) points out:

The basic obligation of searching out the meaning and application of Torah was no easy matter. It was assisted by the recognition that Torah had already been applied and "lived out" by earlier figures from the time of the prophets, pre-eminently exemplified in the restoration of Torah under Ezra. Thus the notion of "Scripture" was as important as the acceptance of Torah, since with the writings coming from the later period, the first interpretations of the meaning of Torah could be found. Yet of course there was no reason in principle to stop at Ezra. [From our standpoint, however, it should be remembered that all previous men were inspired in various ways, hence, authoritative interpreters, whereas those following the time of Ezra, were neither inspired nor authoritative. HEF] In practice it proved necessary, not least because of the proliferation of "scriptures"; but in fact the important point was that *the earlier writings recorded the first implementations of Torah, and tradition continued the record in the "post-scriptural" period.* From this point of view, *the long tradition of what it has meant to obey Torah (and, equally, to disobey Torah) is in a sense as important as Torah itself.* Torah and

Scripture have a distinct status, but *the tradition of what Torah means in practice continued to be an essential part of exegesis.*

Thus, for Jesus to ignore tradition meant to reject, as it seemed to the scholars, one of the most essential tools of Biblical Interpretation.

2. Jesus seemed to side with the Sadducean philosophy of tradition. Surprisingly enough for Bible readers, the very fact that Jesus should reject tradition seemed automatically to align Him with the Sadducean attitude toward tradition. Bowker (*ibid.*, 18) notes that "the Sadducees denied the validity, both of the methods of Hakamic exegesis, and of the support which they gave to traditional ways of doing things, and . . . they insisted on the application of the literal text of Torah wherever possible . . ." (See also Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6.) Edersheim (*Life*, I, 313f) cautions that it would be a great historical inaccuracy to think that the Sadducees had no traditions at all, for "the Sadducees did not lay down the principle of absolute rejection of all traditions as such, but that they were opposed to traditionalism as represented and carried out by the Pharisees." (See also note on 15:9.) And, while Jesus' theology was not at all materialistic like that of the Sadducees, certainly He too opposed traditionalism as fostered and practiced by the Pharisees. They could not but feel that His anti-traditional attitude swung too much weight behind their opponents' policy.
3. Jesus was popular. Among all the preceding leading lights in Judaism the Pharisees enjoyed the popular vote and the deepest influence. (Cf. Mark's expression: "Pharisees and all the Jews," 7:3) But with the advent of Jesus, however, public opinion had begun to swing away from those Separatists and their minutiae. As Morgan (*Matthew*, 194) preaches:

The attractive power of Jesus Christ did not lie in the accidentals which appealed to a few; it was rather that of His essential humanity, which found an answer in all human life, notwithstanding the accidentals of birth and position and education.

So, when Jesus' prodigious popular ministry numbered thousands in His audiences and when He publicly flouted time-honored traditions, His fame and influence plainly signalled a revolution in public thought.

An exquisite passage in Josephus (*Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6), himself a Pharisee (cf. *Life*, 2), summarizes the Pharisean position as he understood it.

This "congressional investigating committee from Jerusalem" sought and soon found an opportunity to open fire. Because of the specific accusation involved in their attack and because their aggression begins in such close proximity to the feeding of the five thousand, it would be easy to consider their assault as somehow related to that event. The Jerusalem rabbis may well have remained stupified by the magnitude of that miracle and all its glorious implications, until one of them, trying to imagine the event, wondered how such a mass of people could properly prepare themselves to eat by doing the prescribed washings. When he struck upon the probability that, out there in the wilderness, they could NOT have washed their hands in the "right" way, all the majesty of God that had been revealed in that stupendous miracle lost its luster in the (for them) more glorious discovery that Jesus' *disciples transgress the tradition of the elders, for they wash not their hands when they eat!*

The timing, if we have correctly understood it, as Matthew and Mark record it, coincides generally with the great Sermon on the Bread of Life delivered in the Capernaum synagogue. (Jn. 6) It was at the conclusion of that soul-testing pronouncement that Jesus' popularity in Galilee collapsed. In perfect concord with John's representation of that popularity crisis, the former Evangelists describe the theological issue of that same climax. (See the introductory critical notes on 14:34-36.) Their point is simple: the ultimate crisis of the cross arises out of this fundamental clash between Jesus' authoritative representation of God's will and His unequivocal rejection of Jewish tradition as inimical to proper fulfillment of God's will.

Mark (7:3, 4) provides the explanation of their contention, a fact that incidentally helps to determine to which readership Mark addressed his Gospel. Matthew omits entirely all explanations about Jewish purification rites, because they would have been perfectly familiar to those whom we have supposed to be his readers, the Hebrews themselves. Mark, in this case, probably needed to explain such matters to his audience, i.e., non-Jews. Because Mark asserts that "all the Jews do not eat unless they wash . . .," we may ask how many among Jesus' associates participated in God's laws on cleanliness and defilement?

1. Lepers kept themselves at a distance from people and cried,

"Unclean," not merely because their disease was contagious, but because of ceremonial defilement of others contacted by them. (Lk. 17:12f; Lev. 13:45f)

2. Mary and Joseph kept the law of birth purification. (Lk. 2:22f, 39)
3. A Jew argued with John's disciples about purification. (Jn. 3:22-30)
4. At the wedding feast in Cana plenty of water was furnished for the Jewish rites of purification. (Jn. 2:6)
5. Peter habitually ate "kosher" food. (Ac. 10:14)
6. The Pharisees themselves strictly avoided defilement and expected others to do the same. (Cf. Mt. 23:25ff; Lk. 7:39; Jn. 18:28)
7. Regulations about food, drink and various washing were a characteristic part of Judaism. (Cfr. Heb. 9:9f)

Because such ceremonious cleansing and ritual purity was so common in Jewish households, Mark's statement that "the Pharisees and all the Jews . . . wash" is not at all extreme, but historically exact. For interesting notes on the historical position of the Pharisees in Judaism, see Lynn Gardner's summary at the end of this chapter.

**15:2 saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.** Note how astutely their denunciation is worded: they consider Jesus' disciples to be the living fruit of His ministry, the exemplification of His doctrine, almost as if they turned Jesus' own words against Him: "By their fruits you shall know them (false prophets)." This charge is serious, because it implies that Jesus Himself teaches His disciples to violate the rules, because the followers undoubtedly reflect Jesus' own views. (Cf. Lk. 11:38) On other occasions they had attempted without success to expose His miracles as worked by secret agreement with Satan. (See on 12:24ff; cf. 9:33f) Having been thoroughly embarrassed by His answers there, these experts now apparently make no effort to deny or "explain" the reality of His supernatural credentials upon which the authority for His claims and practice was based. These critics now blast the Lord where they suppose they can hurt Him worst: His disregarding their revered traditional practices. To believe wrongly is bad enough, but to teach others to ignore the accepted norms is infinitely worse. So, had the Pharisees only been theologically correct, their attack would have been rightly ordered and truly devastating.

This debate is fundamental, not peripheral, regardless of our western attitude toward the specific tabus involved here. Back of both Jesus' and the Pharisees' arguments is the basic concept of CLEANNES

and DEFILEMENT. We must never lose sight of the fact that the fundamental idea of defilement by eating "unclean foods," or by contact with "unclean objects or persons" was actually part of God's Law. (Cf. Lev. 5:2f; 7:19-21; 11; 13-15; 17:15f; 18; 19:31; 21:4, 11f; 22:1-9; Nu. 5:3; 6:9; 9:6f; 19:13, 20, 22; Dt. 21:22f; 14:3-21; 23:10-14) Once these laws are understood, the modern surprise that smiles at such carefulness in washing as that practiced among the Jews becomes unnecessary and unjustifiable.

Cleanness, simply stated, is that state in which man might not only worship or approach God, but also in which he might live in fellowship with his human society. Contrarily, uncleanness, impurity or defilement mean that he is in a state where this kind of worship or approach to God is impossible and his social relations with his fellows are hindered. So, this whole concept of clean and unclean has little, if anything, directly to do with physical cleanliness or hygiene, except perhaps indirectly and subordinately.

(Is it possible, on the other hand, that God considered literal, physical cleanness and hygiene, ALONG WITH MORAL, SPIRITUAL PURITY, as not only a condition of fellowship with Him, but also conducive to man's deeper happiness in his earthly condition? That is, is it possible that physical filth and corruption are also abhorrent to God because unrepresentative of His perfect creation in which "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good"? According to this understanding, then, even physical hygiene and removal of material filth become man's responsibility in order to keep himself physically proper for God's sight and ready for human comradeship. This view, while not at all denying that God has always intended that man keep himself morally pure, hence fit for divine and human fellowship, intends only to picture some of the Levitical washing laws as also intended to remove real dirt, germs and other filth that defile, disease or otherwise render a person unready for divine and human fellowship. Further, this view has the advantage of seeing the human being as a whole, composed of body and spirit, *both of which* must be pure and undefiled before God's holy presence and, thus, ready for human society.)

The concept of moral filth is also important to our understanding. (See Isa. 4:4; 64:6; 65:5; Lam. 1:8f, 17; Ezek. 22:15; 24:12f; 36:25; Ezra 9:11; Prov. 30:12) However, a careful examination of these passages and the above-mentioned laws will not render any specific



law that requires any Hebrew to wash his hands before meals. It is understandable, however, that the learned concept of a defilement that must be removed by washing should affect Jewish thinking so deeply as to find expression in the desire to eliminate even potential defilement. Nevertheless, GOD DID NOT COMMAND THE HANDWASHING RITUAL.

Its institution was attributed to Solomon (*Shab.* 14b; on washing in general, cf. *Hag.* 2.4f; *Ber.* 14b, 15b, 22a; *Shab.* 14b) However, in a comment on Num. 18:7 in *Sifre*, sec. 116, it is argued that if a priest must bathe his hands before service in the Temple, so he must sanctify his hands before eating holy things in the country. For him to eat holy things is like the service in the Temple. Therefore, it is concluded, handwashing to eat food sanctified is required by the Torah. It should be noticed here that the very necessity to argue the case of handwashing puts in doubt the presumed Solomonic, hence, inspired, origin of the custom, as if it were not so Solomonic after all, despite the fact that it is said that, when he instituted handwashing, the Divine Voice (*Bath Qol*) came forth giving approval. (*Shab.* 14b) Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 70) notes, further, that handwashing "was a matter of continuing controversy: even as late as the compilation of *B. Hull.* 105a it was not determined how much of the washing of hands was obligatory and how much meritorious"; and one man was treated as apostate because he threw doubt on cleansing of hands. (See *ISBE*, 415 on "Bath Kol" for an excellent discussion of the so-called "Divine Voice" concept that arose in Judaism after the cessation of true prophetism.)

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 13) agrees that immediately prior to Christ, Hillel and Shammai agreed on hand-washing and fixed the rabbinic views on this subject, even though it did not take on the force of universal authoritative tradition until the time of Christ. In this case, the hand-washing ordinance would have been a recent enactment which, by specific rabbinic rules, could not be questioned or invalidated.

Further, the precise report of the scribes' attack "affords most valuable indirect confirmation of the trustworthiness of his Gospel, as not only showing intimate familiarity with the minutiae of Jewish 'tradition,' but giving prominence to what was then a present controversy—and all this the more, that it needs intimate knowledge of that law even fully to understand the language of the Evangelist." (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 14f)

However much in harmony with the concept of Biblical cleanness and defilement the hand-washing ritual may have logically fit, it is of human, not divine, origin. However well it may have seemed to instill in people a sense of what was common, profane or unclean and what was sanctified or holy (cf. Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26), still it was human judgment that decided it so. Further, whereinsofar each single Hebrew freely chose to wash his hands before eating food in full awareness of the contamination that pollutes the soul and can only be washed by the blood of perfect sacrifices and as a symbol of that cleansing, there could be no valid argument against such a free, independent, personal decision. Here, even the Christian laws of personal liberty would fully permit this personal choice. However, the rabbis had elevated their interpretation to the status of authoritative custom possessed of special value or merit within itself in the service of God, and by this move they took the act out of the realm of free, personal choice and placed it in the realm of law.

To appreciate the seriousness and apparent justice of the Pharisees' question, we must see that Judaism in general viewed the Mosaic Law as consisting of two equally essential parts: the written Law, i.e., the Pentateuch, and the oral, or traditional, Law. The former was penned by Moses and commented upon by the prophets. The latter, or oral law, was supposedly whispered by God to Moses and handed down only in oral form, never reduced to writing until the second century after Christ in the Mishnah (collected around 132-200 A.D.) and developed by "Haggadah" or additional comments, illustrations, anecdotes and wise sayings, "Halakah," or casuistry, traditional ordinances, logical legal deductions and finally collected in the "Talmudim" in the third and fourth centuries after Christ.

The essential difficulty of the Jews lay in their undifferentiated view of traditions. They could rightly cite "prophetic precedents" for some practical interpretations of the law, as, for example, Nehemiah's city ordinance that protected Sabbath observance in Jerusalem (Neh. 13:15-22), Ezra's marriage reforms (Ez. 10; Neh. 13:23ff), Malachi's pronouncements on divorce (Mal. 2:13-16) and others. These illustrate how the Law was to be interpreted. However, they failed to see that THESE "traditional interpretations" were made by prophets or by inspired men, an observation that cannot with justice be made for those traditions born of common, uninspired attempts to interpret and apply the Law. It was the assumption that the intertestamental elders' opinions carried as much weight as that of inspired prophets that got them into this difficulty. This

is the reason why the *Bath Qol* concept was so malicious a doctrine: it gave apparent divine sanction to purely human notions!

Jesus' entire argument, that their traditions (on hand-washing supposedly attributed to Solomon) annul the Word of God, flatly denies the Solomonic paternity of that custom, hence of the traditional authority upon which it was based. Affirmations that these oral traditions were given by God to Moses and handed down unerringly and uninterruptedly to Jesus' contemporaries, must, of course, be documented. But the bad joke on "oral tradition" is that when it is documented, it is no longer "oral" but written, and, if written, subject to the same tests as any other written document, subject to the same historical verification as any other report of things that are said to be. Unconfirmed Mishnaic affirmations that the traditions were handed down through a given chain of authorities must not be accepted without proof. (Cf. *Aboth*. 1:1-4 or *Tosefta*: *Yad* 2:16) Other than these allegations, is there any trustworthy documentary evidence that PROVES a greater antiquity for these traditions than the post-exilic period? This is not to say that the rabbis did not even try to document and/or antedate their traditions. In fact, rabbinic defence of oral tradition as "essentially Mosaic" took the route of:

1. Warped exegesis of texts like Dt. 4:14 and Ex. 24:12, whereby the attempts are made to identify the Mishnah and the Talmud hidden in words of these texts. Hosea 8:12 is supposed to mean that God did not write all of His Law, hence, if He wished Israel to know it, it was passed down by oral tradition, i.e., unwritten, and nonetheless authentic and authoritative. (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 99)
2. Confusion of local judicial decisions for revelations from God forever binding the conscience of all succeeding generations. (Study Dt. 17:8-13)

But this is far from proving Mishnaic assertions, like those of *Aboth*. i.1-4, or *Yad*. ii. 16 (*Tosefta*), that presume to list a few of the "elders."

This is why the Pharisees' charge must never be dismissed as simple sectarian punctiliousness, as if they could not find any greater misdemeanor than this, whereas the disciples of Jesus truly conducted themselves so inoffensively that this was the very worst accusation that could be levelled against them. To think this way is to miss the point of what it means to BELIEVE IN "INSPIRED TRADITIONS!" Equally erroneous is any sniggering about a Rabbi Joses' determination "that to eat with unwashed hands is as great a sin as adultery,"

because his view is perfectly consistent with his belief in the divine origin and authority of both ordinances, the former being decided by a Voice from heaven (*Bath Qol*), the latter by a written commandment at Sinai. He is not seeking to distinguish what is essential from what is non-essential in what he believes (wrongly, we think) to be God's Word. The rabbi's mistake is in believing that God inspired or authorized the tradition about hand-washing.

### B. JESUS COUNTERATTACKS (15:3-20; Mk. 7:6-23)

#### 1. Before the Pharisees: "You break God's Law to keep your rules!"

**15:3 Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? Ye also:** this is no mere *ad hominem* argument whereby Jesus defends the practice of His disciples by pointing out that the Pharisees are also culpable. *Ye also* admits the disciples' guilt, but with the vast difference that, whereas the disciples were confessedly guilty of ignoring human traditions, the critics themselves were liable for a far more serious crime, not against men, but against the living God! Morgan (*Matthew*, 196) is right to observe that, had He excused the disciples or suggested that, after all, they had not violated tradition, He would tacitly have admitted that tradition as such was not so blameable, but was, rather, the commonly accepted norm. But by saying "*Ye also*," He admitted this violation of tradition, thus opening the way to attack tradition as normative. Note that He never objects to the traditional hand-washing as a custom. Rather, He firmly refused to recognize it as a conscience-binding rule of religion.

An important question to consider now is whether the Pharisees of any age set out deliberately to *transgress the commandment of God in order to keep their traditions*. There is a type of Pharisee that finds it undesirable to observe some command of God, and so deliberately sets it aside, hoping to make up for his failure by being extra scrupulous at some other point. This, it is assumed, will compensate for his refusal to observe the other precept. At last, this kind of compensation can so deaden his conscience that it no longer rebukes his disobedience, since, after all, it is supposedly covered by his severe strictness elsewhere. But may it be assumed that this kind of deliberate disobedience is intended here? Since Jesus is dealing with people whose reliance is upon the Law and whose boast is

their relation to God, who know His will and approve what is excellent (cf. Ro. 2:17ff), their failure may well be found in their blindness, i.e., their inability to conceive the possibility that their own rules, invented to "protect and correctly apply" God's Law, could actually transgress that Law. (However, see also on 15:6.)

It may be that these legalists were not at all intending to ignore any part of God's Word in their attention to tradition, because their declared purpose for creating these "fences to hedge in the Law" was to protect it against violation. However, their scrupulous observance of human traditional practice led surely and directly to a corresponding negligence and unscrupulousness regarding God's Word. Thus, the entire procedure was a question of ATTENTION. (Cf. notes on 13:9) By their elaborate arguments they gave close attention to human procedures, debating trifles and treated as matters of conscience what could never affect nor effect inward purity. But, by so doing, they unconsciously turned their attention away from the very laws of God they proposed to interpret and obey! Here is another case where, had they given attention to God's preferences for "mercy and not sacrifice" (see on 9:13 and 12:7), they would not have forgotten nor ignored true morality by insisting on such arbitrary interpretations and rituals.

It is because of this "traditionalist mentality," this inability to see how far human rules and attempts at interpretation can really supplant God's will, that Jesus attacks the whole system of tradition. The key to understanding this entire discourse and its proper application in our own case lies in 15:9. What is perhaps most damning is that attitude taken in the Mishnah (*Sanh.* xi. 3): "It is more punishable to act against the words of the Scribes than against the Scripture." (quoted by Edersheim, *Sketches*, 223) This explains why Jesus could never treat traditionalism with indifference! (Cf. Jer. 8:8) Not only was failure to comply with their rules perfectly legitimate: direct opposition to them was a duty! At every point where human authority competes with God's, it must not only be accepted. It must be resisted.

By saying *your tradition*, the Lord renders those rabbis immediately and personally responsible for the customary usages they hold and teach as conscience-binding rules. Even though these impositions are the inventions of others (*the elders*), those who uphold and pass them on are equally liable for having followed their guides. (See on 15:14; cf. Mich. 6:16.) By characterizing their procedure as *transgressing the commandment of God*, Jesus warns His followers against

the evil consequences of men's imposing their strictures upon others, because, while initially seeming only to restrict the freedom of action enjoyed by Christ's disciples, they proceed to become laws where God not only made none, but deliberately left men free to decide spontaneously and responsibly.

While it is certainly true and probably right to affirm, with some, that while Jesus' clash with the Pharisees is a collision between two views of religion, between externalism and spiritual religion, and while the great defect of rabbinism was to make sin so merely external that an act was considered right or wrong depending upon the presence or absence of some external condition, yet the fundamental problem, according to the Lord, is not externalism as such. This supreme religious contest is waged over the fundamental problem of **AUTHORITY IN RELIGION**: shall it be human or divine? Shall we break God's Law to keep men's or vice versa? Externalism is but one symptom and a result of the even greater defect, i.e., teaching as obligatory what is but the precept of men. Externalism is only admissible where human authority has already begun to take precedence over God's.

**15:4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** (Ex. 20:12; 21:17) *For God said* is Jesus' final word on the divine paternity of the passages in question. His word cannot be laughed off as mere "cultural accommodation to the popular prejudices and traditional understanding of Pentateuchal authorship." For those who have ears to hear Jesus, He makes a clear-cut distinction between human traditions, as followed by the elders of the Pharisees, and the Word of God as a divine, infallible guide. This should warn all scholars everywhere that for Jesus Christ the indisputably right author of Exodus is really Moses (Mk. 7:10) and God (Mt. 15:4). It would be crushingly ironic, were Jesus, in His argument against human traditions that He regards as mistaken, however well received on ancient authority, to cite what, according to modern criticism of the Old Testament, turns out to be nothing better than human tradition! By such standards, Jesus Himself must be seen to fall into the same confusion of which He accused His opponents! (See also on 15:7 where He points to Isaiah as the real author of his prophecy.) But if the Lord may be credited with even average rationality, He could have seen that the validity of His arguments **DEPENDED** upon the unquestionably divine origin and traceable transmission of the citations He adduces. It is in this kind of context that the afore-mentioned

thesis of some "scholarly" criticism fails its most crucial test by refusing to permit Jesus to testify in an area where He is most qualified to speak. Either Jesus said this or He did not. If He said it, then the critics cannot affirm that His quotations and indications of prophetic paternity and divine inspiration of the OT books represent merely the traditional beliefs of the Jewish people. It is false to accuse the Lord of having refused to declare Himself on such critical Old Testament questions, thus leaving such matters for the relatively recent European scholarship to decide, when, as a matter of fact, He is actually discussing traditions.

For Matthew to quote Jesus as saying, "For God said . . .," while at this same point Mark (7:10) says, "For Moses said . . ." creates no contradiction, because the Lord may have actually said both; "For God through Moses commanded, saying . . ." In this case, the Evangelists simplify these introductory words, since both recognize Moses' divine mandate and God's human agent.

**Honor thy father and thy mother**, according to Jesus, is a command with life-long obligations. No amount of physical maturity can ever release the children from due respect for their parents, because *honor* has no terminal limits. In fact, *honor* means, among other things, to maintain them with daily sustenance. (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:3-17; Eph. 6:1-3) Jesus honored His earthly parents and cared for His mother as best He could. (Lk. 2:51; Jn. 19:26f) **He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** Edersheim, (*Life*, II, 21) notices this typically rabbinical method in Jesus' answer by which He mentioned, along with the precept, the penalty for its transgression. This detail has evidential value in that it reveals the Master's intimate knowledge of His people's traditional manner of teaching the Law. He is no ignorant iconoclast. Rather, He meets the scribes on their own grounds, reads them their own Scriptures and leaves them self-condemned. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 211) reminds:

The sin of cursing parents is here opposed to the duty of honouring them. Those who speak ill of their parents, or wish ill to them, who mock at them, or give them taunting and opprobrious language, break this law. If to call a brother *Raca* be so penal, what is it to call a father so? By our Saviour's application of this law, it appears, that denying service or relief to parents is included in cursing them. Though the language be respectful enough, and nothing abusive in it, yet what will that avail, if the deeds be not agreeable? It is like him that said, *I go, Sir, and went not.* ch. xxi. 30.

God had placed reverence for parents on the same level with Israel's national and personal holiness and in context with the sanctity of the sabbath and with the proper worship of God. (See Lev. 19:3f.) It is because the majesty of God, violated in this disrespect for the persons of the parents that the sin of cursing them is made punishable with death. All of God's representatives are to be served with honor and fear, because in this commandment lies the foundation for order in the whole social realm. Here God teaches us to acknowledge rightful authority by showing proper reverence in thought, word and deed. Out of this understanding of the true positions of father and child grows our appreciation of, and demand for, good government and, consequently, our grasp of the Kingdom of God. This relationship is so fundamental, because it gives moral character and stability to a nation, and prosperity and well-being to its people. Thus, the failure adequately to value this parent-child relationship, especially through the grown son's refusal to support his aging parents, is direct evidence of a fundamental moral decline in appreciation for the majesty and authority of God. Not only is the image of God in the parents no longer kept sacred, but the Word and authority of God are also ignored. This is why refusal to support one's parents in their helplessness and senility is a sin worthy of capital punishment under the Mosiac system.

**15:5 But ye say:** Here is written the condemnation of every false religion, because, notwithstanding the fact that God has spoken, men think they can still have their say! By so thinking, they permitted a scribal rule to wipe out one of the Ten Commandments! Here Jesus quoted God's Law, and then threw the rabbinical position into sharp contrast with it. Consider, however, what is involved when He quotes a command of God and then throws His own word into contrast with it. (Cf. Mt. 5:21f, 27f, 31f, 33f, 38f, 43f) In the former case, the Jews had no divine authority to make any alteration in God's Law; in the latter, however, Jesus Himself was God's Word come in human flesh to reveal God's changes of emphasis. (Cf. Jn. 1:14, 17f)

Why Jesus should select this particular illustration to deal with the rabbis' attack is understood differently by commentators. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 134) thinks:

This example did not touch the question of uncleanness, but it proved that tradition was an unauthoritative and mischievous guide, and as the objection of the scribes was based on the



authority of tradition, it destroyed the force of an objection. The particular tradition about eating with unwashed hands is discussed on its merits in the next paragraph: principles are settled first, and details afterward.

However, Edersheim (*Life*, II, 19), on the basis of a Talmudic comment that may well represent earlier rabbinical thought, believes Jesus to have seen an association of ideas between the Pharisees' accusation about washing of hands and "the hand of Corban":

The Talmud explains that, when a man simply says: 'That (or, if) I eat or taste such a thing,' it is imputed as a vow, and he may not eat or taste of it, 'because the hand is on the Qorban' (*Jer. Nedar.* 36d, line 22)—the mere touch of Qorban had sanctified it, and put it beyond his reach, just as if it had been laid on the altar itself. Here, then, was a contrast. According to the Rabbis, the touch of 'a common' hand defiled God's good gift of meat, while the touch of 'a sanctified' hand in rash or wicked words might render it impossible to give anything to a parent, and so involved the grossest breach of the Fifth Commandment! Such, according to Rabbinic Law, was the 'common' and such the 'sanctifying' touch of the hands . . .

In any case, the fundamental principle involved is the concept of vows. Mark (7:11) underlies this by bringing into his Gospel a Hebrew word he then has to translate for his uninformed readers: "Corban (that is, Given to God)." What is this *Corban*-concept? Was the *Corban*-clause a deliberate ploy to avoid responsibility to parents, or was it not, rather, just another apparently correct application or interpretation of divine Law, that, however apparently orthodox in intention, was used in actual practice to justify just this same sort of inhumanity scored by Jesus here? Thus, regardless of its original intention or regardless of the sincerity of the human authors who started this tradition, it was used to subvert God's commands. If we would avoid the same trap, we need to understand:

1. The Biblical revelations that formers of the *Corban*-clause could cite for its correctness. Consider the following passages and see if you too come out with any other conclusion than that, once a person has promised to give God something, he is duty-bound to do so; Num. 30:2; Lev. 19:12; 27; Dt. 23:21-23; Prov. 20:25; Eccl. 5:2, 4-6; Zech. 8:16f.
2. The human arguments for the *Corban*-clause. Since it would be

necessary to distinguish between a loosely-stated half-intention and a solemn promise, it may be that the Jews decided that a vow had not been made unless the person should affirm: "It is given" (= *Corban*). This would establish clearly in the minds of all that a solemn oath has been pronounced. Naturally, no one who made this serious affirmation before God would consider breaking the oath once made. Therefore it stood as valid, and any failure to maintain it would be equal to taking God's Name in vain and so the man would be held liable before God.

3. The fatal flaw in the *Corban*-doctrine. The precepts governing oaths presume that a person is actually free to give to the Lord what he voluntarily promises. (Dt. 23:23) But, if God has already obligated a man to use his possessions differently than he might have vowed, then is he no longer free to vow them to the Lord. He must use them as God commanded, as, for example, to care for his aged parents. He must not vow them at all, for to vow them brings them under the law of oaths which require that he pay what he had no right even to promise, thus bringing one of God's laws into contradiction with another of His laws. But God had left a way out: REPENTANCE of the oath and SACRIFICE for the sin of having thus to break it! (Lev. 5:4-6) Further, the possession thus vowed could actually be redeemed from the Lord by adding 20% to its value. (Lev. 27) These two steps made it possible to obey God and care for one's parents, despite the ill-taken oath.

(The fact that a father might cancel a vow made by a daughter, by forbidding her fulfilling it, suggests the principle that filial obedience to a father stands higher in God's eyes than carrying out her self-imposed religious service. See Lev. 30:3-5)

4. The positive perniciousness of the *Corban*-doctrine: The fact that God had not revealed the *Corban*-concept should warn against its ever being considered all-inclusive and absolute, lest anyone abuse God's other revelations in ways of which he may yet be unaware. This *Corban*-concept, when blindly and absolutely carried to its severely logical extreme, could not but actually encourage people to neglect morality because of a religious quibble, a punctilious principle, and so pave the way for that spiritual deterioration that ends in unembarrassed iniquity.

Is it true that the man who pronounced the magic word, *Corban*,

not only avoided thereby his obligation to support his parents, but could at the same time continue to enjoy the comforts and use of his own possessions although vowed to the service of God? If this sham dedication was as common as the real, Jesus' denunciation adequately touches both cases.

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 18ff, emphasis added) states that what might be suspected about the common usage of language, held true even in the case of Corban. "It must not be thought that the pronunciation of the votive word 'Qorban,' . . . necessarily dedicated a thing to the Temple. The meaning might simply be, and generally was, that *it was to be regarded LIKE Qorban*—that is, that in regard to the person or persons named, the thing termed was to be considered AS IF it were Qorban, laid on the altar, and put entirely out of their reach." Accordingly, what is involved here is not so much a consecration to God, but an oath of personal obligation, and binding, even though it involve a breach of the Law. (*Nedar*, ii, 2)

If no real service to God is intended, how much more wicked is the selfish son who talks this way!

So, human need, according to Jesus, takes precedence over any rites and ceremonies, especially those of admittedly human origin. For God is not so much interested in precise and punctual performance of ceremonies as He is in relieving human suffering and making men over in His image. It is increasingly important today to remember that God thinks SOME ceremonies to be beautifully fitted to accomplish these high goals. He admits no false dichotomy between ceremonies and merciful helpfulness, because He knows that He can have BOTH. (See notes on 9:13.) Jesus' words must never be distorted to mean that ceremonies, like baptism, the Lord's Supper, congregational worship and such, may be safely dispensed with as somehow unimportant, and perhaps even detrimental because susceptible of becoming empty ceremonialisms. In the case of ceremonies which God has ordained, a Scriptural case could be made for the spiritual benefits accruing to the sincere disciple who participates in them. (Cf. *Psa.* 51:16-19) So, before concluding that we may decide to sacrifice ceremonies to morality on the basis of something we think Jesus means in this text, we must recall that He intends "morality" in the sense of what God defines as morality. No arbitrary decision of ours about what constitutes morality may disagree with His, for to ignore His decisions about ceremonies is immoral.

Note the general principle that not even gifts given to God Himself can close His eyes to the inhumanity and disobedience of selfish hearts. (Cf. Dt. 10:17; 1 Sam. 15:22) Here were men who were trying to be so holy that they could not use their "holy" money to obey the command of God! Any money given to God today usually and rightly goes to help some human being. He does not need our money. (Mic. 6:6-8; Psalms. 50:10-15) So, logically, it must be used to help people. Further, in the sense that the aged parents had the right to expect filial support, the traditional interpretation of the rabbis was a violation of human rights.

15:6 **He shall not honor his father.** These words belong grammatically to the words of the traditionalists, but it may well be asked whether they ever said this in so many words.

1. Lenski (*Matthew*, 585) comments that "the remark that the Pharisees would scarcely have contradicted the Fourth (sic) Commandment so flatly does honor to Christian feeling but fails to understand the Pharisees."
2. Farrar (*Life*, 338, note 2) notes that "some of the rabbis had expressly taught that a vow superseded the necessity of obedience to the fifth commandment." That they actually so taught is documented in the Mishnah, (*Nedar*, ii. 2; ix. 1; v), only collected in the late second century A.D.

Accordingly, it is possible to credit the Pharisees with having taken the extreme position whereby the *Corban*-principle actually transcended the Fifth Commandment and codified it into law by the time of the Mishnah collection, whereas in Jesus' time it may have been in the formative stage. Had the common non-Pharisee said in so many words, *He shall not honor his father*, his rejection of God's commandment would be obvious, because expressed in language so nearly equal to God's that it called attention to it. Rather, in Christ's time, they may have decided simply: "Anyone who pronounces 'Corban' over his property is obligated thereby not to use its value for any other purpose not consonant with its dedication to the Temple." If this were the case, then Jesus slices away all the rule's apparent legality by pointing to an application so evident, so practical and so vicious, that none but the willfully blind could deny it. The purpose of God's Temple is to express His concern that men learn to live not only holy lives before God, but also to learn to love and honor one another. What a tragedy that one's own parents should be shut out of God's plan for their care in their senior years by a

deliberate misuse of God's plans! Knofel Staton (*Perfect Balance*, 83), applying this text, rightly challenges:

Do we consider a person's provisions to his needy parents a part of "church" giving? (Read 1 Timothy 5:1-16) What kind of witness do Christians give to unbelievers when we turn the care of our parents over to the government? Is God happy that our faith-promise pledge is high while our care for our parents is nil?

Unless we remain sensitive to what God desires, we too may buy the rubbish of the rabbis by letting some magic oath, some home-made, ax-grinding rule release men from a God-ordained obligation.

Jesus' conclusion: **And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition.** Again Jesus' emphasis is on the personal responsibility of those who follow the tradition: "*your tradition* which you hand on. And many such things you do." (Mk. 7:13) Edersheim (*Life*, II, 17) notes that

It was an admitted Rabbinic principle that, while the ordinances of Scripture required no confirmation, those of the Scribes needed such, [Babylonian Talmud, *R.H.* 18b, cf. Bowker, p. 135] and that no Halakhah [i.e. traditional law] might contradict Scripture. (*Jer. Taan.* 66a)

From this standpoint, therefore, Jesus not only proved that on this critical issue and in many others (Mk. 7:13), the scribes' traditional views contradicted or vitiated the Law of God, but He was also arguing on grounds perfectly acceptable to the scribes themselves, and by their own rules they stood self-condemned!

**Your tradition:** points to the human origin and transmission of such rules. Accordingly, not every traditional practice comes under the condemnation of the Lord, because there do exist good and true traditions, defined as such by their ORIGIN. (Cf. 1 Co. 15:3 "I delivered = *parédoka*"; 11:2, 23; 2 Th. 2:15; 3:6; Jude 3 "delivered," *paradositheise*; 2 Pt. 2:21 "delivered") This very distinction in ORIGIN signals the chasm that separates acceptable from unacceptable traditions: are they from God, i.e. delivered (or handed down) by the prophets and apostles? If so, accept and obey, cherish and teach them. Are they products of human reasoning? If so, beware of elevating them to the level of divine authority, since they may be found to promote violations of God's Word. Of course, they may not too, since they may be nothing more than the good, practical ways of understanding and applying God's Word in a given period.

Their ever-present weakness is their humanness.

A modern illustration may serve here. The Holy Spirit describes Christian baptism in the New Testament as the burial in water of a penitent believer for the forgiveness of his sins, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Ac. 2:38; 8:38f; 22:16 *et al.*) Over the centuries, however, it has become traditional to acknowledge as valid baptism some other act:

1. which consists in nothing more than a sprinkling of water on the head of a baby that cannot believe, repent or confess personal faith in Jesus Christ;
2. or, which, in other cases, while being performed by immersion has no vital connection with a salvation that has, according to its practioners, already occurred in the believer, hence is not absolutely essential to receive remission of sins, the gift of the Spirit, eternal life, etc.
3. or is eliminated altogether as a superfluous relic of a bygone age.

Whenever human traditions dare say that anything else is just as good as, or just as saving as, what God requires, they fall under the same condemnation Jesus levels against those who *made void the word of God because of their traditions*. We ought therefore to have a holy fear of any religious system that affirms that ANYTHING is required for our becoming Christians or for maturing our spiritual life, more than the commandment of Christ or the Apostles. Not even men's best applications or extension of meaning of Scripture will do, because no time at all is required for these to become a tradition which rivals God's Word, no matter how well grounded in good reasons those applications might once have been.

15:7 **Ye hypocrites** is Jesus' epithet for them, perhaps to avoid calling them moral imbeciles. The justifications for His judgment are multiple:

1. They had condemned Jesus' disciples for ignoring human traditions, while they themselves, because of their devotion to those human opinions, disobeyed God's Word, while pretending great devotion to God!
2. So painfully careful about ceremonial defilement of hands and household articles, they ignored the real pollution of the heart by their sins and their bold contradictions of God's Word.

3. They pretended to the teaching, judging office, whereas they had become incapable of discerning what is vital in morality! Intolerantly, they made mere trifles into matters superior to justice, mercy, faith and obedience to God! Morality was sacrificed to ritual.
4. By their attitude they were expecting that men consider them as holy as they ought to be before God, but they were not. In their self-deception they had arrived at the point where they actually considered themselves to be what they only pretended to be.

**Isaiah prophesied well of you hypocrites**, not in the sense that he said something predictive about the Pharisees personally, but in the sense that what he affirmed of the hypocrites of his own day, taken as a class, so well describes you, because, by your actions, you have placed yourselves in that class. **Ye hypocrites** form a class so large that your colleagues were the object of God's reproof in Isaiah's day, and what He said about your crowd rings true about you younger members of that notorious crew! How unchangeable is God's ethics: seven centuries had not made any difference in morality: hypocrisy was an abomination to God in the historical context of both Isaiah and Jesus Christ. Here is evidence of an underlying unity in the moral realm that should give us pause when we boast of great moral achievements, lest we think we have discovered something the prophets were already preaching centuries before Christ!

**Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites:** "Before attaching so much weight to the beliefs and doctrines of the ancients which you cite against me, you should honestly and critically examine what God's inspired prophets were saying about them when those ancients actually lived!" The ancients had failed to grasp the futility of punctilious performance of HUMAN prescriptions and commands as if they were the expression of true worship and submission to God's Word. *The elders* and their children had followed them blindly, disregarding how far those human regulations led them away from the way of righteousness and true godliness. Therefore, because the Pharisees pretended to accept the prophecies of Isaiah, it was easy for the Lord to destroy the presumed authority of the elders who had ignored God's revelations, since Isaiah had already scored their blindness in his day. His accusations are multiple:

1. **HEARTLESS FORMALISM: This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me.**

2. SELF-DECEPTION and consequent FUTILITY: **In vain do they worship me.**
3. SUBSTITUTION: **Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.**

What was wrong? Missing were the essential ingredients of true worship and a right approach to God: concentration on God and His revealed will.

1. They did not approach God in the right spirit (Jn. 4:23f)
  - a. There must be a longing love to meet God in Christ through real adoration. Hypocrites have less interest in obedience and loyalty to a revelation than they do their own ideas. In effect, they worship self when they give absolute value to their own exalted opinions.
  - b. There must be a consequent humility that permits a true self-evaluation before God. Hypocrites' prayers no longer evidence their dependence upon God, because THEY need no grace, no power, nor guidance. (Cf. 2 Ti. 3:5; Isa. 1:11-20; 1 Sam. 15:15, 22f; Psalms 51:16f; Prov. 21:3, 27; 15:8; 28:9)
  - c. There must be a capacity to be compassionate toward any of God's creatures who is lost without God or who otherwise needs God's merciful help expressed through His people. Hypocrites can only look down in unmoving pity upon such unfortunates beneath their level. They think: "If God blesses the good and curses the bad, then to help those staggering under the curse of common human problems which I don't have would overturn God's judgment against them. Better leave them alone to suffer!" We must not put religious pride above human need by caring only about the rigid preservation of our system. (Jas. 1:26f)
2. They did approach God in truth. (Cf. Jn. 4:23f)
  - a. We must approach God according to the truth of God. This means, therefore, the right use of those forms of worship and service that are acceptable to God. A real love for God expresses itself, among other things, by adoring and serving Him by observing those ceremonials which He has instituted. (Cf. Ac. 17:30f; Ro. 10:1-3) Hypocrites, on the other hand, lay great stress on these ceremonials, because, being external, they can be counterfeited, thus gaining for those who do them credit for holiness in the eyes of those they seek to impress. (Cf. Ezek. 33:30-33; contrast Jeroboam's false worship: 1 Kg. 13:25—14:6) But where man's heart truly seeks the living God, even the



- external forms are acceptable and accepted because founded upon God's truth. (See 1 Co. 10:14-33; 2 Co. 11:1-15; Gal. 1:6-10; 4:1-11; 5:1-14; Col. 2:16-23; Jude; Mt. 23:1-39; Lu. 11:37-52.)
- b. We must approach God in sincerity, with a true heart, in truth.
- (1) The presence of sin in one's life indicates a heart that is far from God. (Mt. 5:19f; Isa. 59:2) Every failure of self-discipline that refuses to eliminate the causes of true impurity invites self-corruption and, at the end, self-destruction. We must learn to hate sin's power to corrupt our conscience and pollute our motives and undermine our will.
  - (2) True purification of heart must eliminate the true uncleanness, sin. (Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; Ac. 8:22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 1 Jn. 1:5-9)

15:9 **But in vain do they worship me.** *In vain* (*màten*) is an expression rich in significance to describe human worship founded solely upon human precepts: It is "vain, wrong, useless, stupid, without motive, reason or wisdom; audacious, false, deceitful" (Rocci, 1186). Such religion is specifically folly, because it imposes upon its adherents a carefulness and rigor that accomplishes precisely nothing except make them uncomfortable, sensitive to trifles, ascetic, hypercritical and intolerant. Further, because such severe self-abasement has no relation to reality, because only what God says is reality, these human demands leave men ignorant of reality, subject to self-deception and superstition.

But why should the spiritually withering and eternally unsatisfying external ceremonies commanded by *the precepts of men* be actually preferred to the wholesome requirements of God?

1. Because ceremonies can be seen and experienced by him who does them, and they satisfy him more easily and sooner than the slow, inner, invisible growth in godliness.
2. Because ceremonies are visible to others, there is also self-satisfaction in being praised as godly by them.
3. Observing rites is far easier than the slow maturing in righteousness and walking with God, having the courage to repent and deny oneself of such easy satisfactions.

15:9 **But in vain do they worship me:** Isaiah and Jesus pronounce the unmitigated futility of such hypocrisy, because great zeal for *precepts of men* can never guarantee anyone that God is pleased or served. (Cf. Ro. 10:1-3) Here is written also the final doom of such hypocrisy, because, since it never produces any result that pleases

God, He has, in effect, never been worshipped nor served by such people. Why should He embrace them in His Kingdom?

While it is well to see that Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 29:13 differs from the standard translation as we have it directly from Hebrew in our Bible, it should be remembered that two factors enter in to explain the difference:

1. Jesus is giving an interpretative paraphrase of Isaiah, showing, even while quoting, how the quotation itself applies to the situation. Such interpretative quotations were common in Judaism, the so-called Targums. (See ISBE, 2910ff; Edersheim, *Life*, I, 206)
2. Since His quotation, with but minor changes in word order, approximates more closely the Septuagint, we must remember that the LXX translates into Greek a Hebrew text that, being far more ancient, hence even more accurate, than our available Hebrew manuscripts of this passage, Jesus might thus be quoting the more accurate reading.

Compare them together:

ISAIAH (Hebrew)	ISAIAH (Greek)	JESUS
Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote.	This people draws near me They honor me with their lips, But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching commandments of men and doctrines.	This people  honors me with the lips,  But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching (as) doctrines commandments of men.

The critical question raised by these readings is: who are the "men" whose commandments are intended: mere humans who never enjoyed inspiration, or God's men treated as mere humans? The implications of either reading are the same, because, following the Hebrew, God's religion ("Their fear of me"), as far as an annoyed Israel was concerned, had become nothing but a boring series of commandments, just a lesson to be memorized. Consequently, their religious practice

was purely perfunctory and habitual, without conviction, because the majesty and authority of God had been forgotten and the words of His prophets were then treated at the merely human level. If we follow the Greek, the prophet is complaining of human opinions being exalted to the level of divine doctrine. Either way, therefore, whether God's Word is debased to the human level, or human doctrines are enthroned beside divine revelation, the same tragic results occur.

As noted above at 15:1, the Pharisees are not alone in following human doctrines, because the Sadducees had their own real traditions too. (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 313f and note 1.) It would have been impossible, in fact, for Luke (Ac. 23:8) to state so clearly their distinctively unbiblical position, had they had absolutely no opinions, no interpretations of Scripture, no philosophy of Law, etc., that marked them out as a separate school of thought (*haireisis*) among the Jews. Whether they accepted ALL the OT or only the Pentateuch, they too come under Jesus' condemnation, because there is enough in those five books to demonstrate the fallacy of their stated views on angels. (Cf. Gen. 16:7-11; 19:1, 15; 22:11, 15; 32:1f; Ex. 3:2; Nu. 22:22-35) Jesus argued against their rejection of the resurrection, from Ex. 3:6 (Mt. 22:32 and par.). Even a later Pharisean rabbi, Gamaliel II, argued from Dt. 1:8 that a resurrection would have to be implied, since the promise was made, not "to you" but "to them." (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 316; II, 403 for *Sanh.* 90b where another rabbi argued the same from Ex. 6:4.)

**Teaching as doctrine the precepts of men** is the precious key to understanding this entire discourse, and, consequently, the clue to its proper application in our own case. This, because even in the law of Christ revealed in the NT, there are many, many details that Christ and the Apostles have not revealed; details that we would like to know in order to complete our obedience to that Law. Thousands of questions arise because of the Lord's deliberate silence in many areas. However, it should be obvious that, since the Lord Himself chose not to reveal His specific will in those areas, He did not consider it important for us to be precise there either. Therefore, whatever we decide to do about matters He has not revealed cannot ever become *precepts* or *doctrines* to be taught to others as law. However, the mere fact that our opinions cannot be taught as *doctrine* is, in itself, insufficient to condemn our decisions, if we recognize

them for what they are, i.e. human opinions. It is, rather, when we begin to TEACH AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN that we automatically fall under Jesus' condemnation. As pointed out in the special study following this chapter, "The Law of Christ—How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee," in areas where God has not commanded or prohibited a given thing, He has left us free to have private opinions, so long as these opinions do not nullify His commandments and are not considered as equal to His Words.

One illustration may serve here: Whereas the Lord requires that Christians sing Him their "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" heartily with thankfulness to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), He did not specify whether in every case those musical expressions are to be accompanied by any or by many musical instruments. His silence leaves Christians free to decide. However, no Christian is free to decide that his decision must become law for others. Nor may he expect their compliance, except insofar as they share his opinion. All, however, must recognize that any opinion in this area is purely human and can never become *doctrine*, either for or against the musical instrument. Therefore, anyone who commands the use of an instrument, or demands its removal, does so on the basis of the same human logic that got the ancient Jews into the moral bind we see in our text, by exalting to the level of teachable *doctrine* what they themselves decided should be *precepts*. To avoid becoming Pharisees when we learn that some sincere disciples of the Lord are using (or not using) a musical instrument to accompany their corporate singing, we should always investigate whether they *teach as doctrine* what, in the final analysis, can be nothing but the opinionable *precepts of men*. On the other hand, if their choice is not being taught as divine law, but recognized as a simple expression of human freedom, without any pretense to a more sacred origin, so that any subsequent alteration or difference in the use of, or non-use of, these things produce no division or contention in the Church, they are free to make use of them or not as things of a purely relative utility.

Protestant traditionalists are perhaps less explicit in their affirmation that their own distinctive doctrines are divinely inspired, than are the Roman Catholic authorities, but are none the less in perfect harmony with the Jewish traditionalistic approach condemned here by the Lord. (See special notes on the inspiration of Catholic tradition, 15:13.)

## 2. Before the multitudes:

"Real defilement is not external, but spiritual!"

(15:10, 11; Mk. 7:14-17)

15:10 **And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them.**

Had this crowd been gathering, but politely ignored during what seemed to be a private conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees? Now, however, He deliberately includes them, as if they, too, had heard the major charge levelled by the Pharisees. Otherwise, this startling declaration (15:11) would seem too much out of context for it to be understood instantly and without further explanation.

Despite the real probability that the "reverend doctors from Jerusalem" would be humiliated by this deliberate escalation, and despite the noticeable embarrassment of the Twelve who felt themselves publically trapped between the official doctrine of the recognized scholars in Judaism and their Master's pronouncements, the Lord Himself cannot further tolerate the substitution of God's truth by whatever means. He must show compassion upon the masses who were led to their spiritual death by these blind, spiritual guides. When the Master turns to the crowds—the non-specialists in Judaism, the multitudes despised by the proud scholars,—this is glorious mercy. The obstinate, unteachable chiefs are bypassed for those who, however weak and unfit in other ways, were far more open and teachable. (See notes on 11:25-30.)

**Hear and understand.** How many of the merely curious and careless would actually ponder His meaning? Here is the acid test of His audience, used in precisely the same manner as in His great Sermon in Parables. (See Mt. 13:9-22 and relative notes.) Man's morality is deeply affected by his own receptivity to truth, because he can decide whether to listen to Jesus or not. By attempting to influence His hearers, He refutes the excuse that sin is somehow necessary under certain circumstances for which the individual is somehow not responsible, because in precisely the same way man can shut the doors of his mind to truth, he can shut them to temptation! So, man is liable for all that comes out of his own heart, because he can decide which way he will permit himself to be influenced, for good or ill. Consequently, every man is the final source of his own character. This is why practical discipleship to Jesus is so vital, because what we let Him teach us affects our attitude toward all else that enters our lives. This urgent invitation to *hear and understand* is rightly addressed, not merely to the scholars, but especially to the "ordinary

people," who must dedicate themselves to study and understand what the Lord means.

Nevertheless, it may be fairly asked to what extent the Lord expected ANY disciple—Apostle or otherwise—to understand and apply His Law-changing, revolutionary declaration about ceremonial purity? (15:11) Since the Levitical system, upon which such distinctions were based, would not be cancelled until His own sacrifice at the cross (Heb. 7:11ff, 26ff; 9:15ff, 24ff; 10:9f; Col. 2:13-15, etc.), did He really expect at least some of them to stop washing themselves after ceremonial defilement, or neglect to eat only kosher foods, and the like? Or, is not this lesson much like that on the new birth of water and the Spirit, presented to Nicodemus? (Cf. Jn. 3:1ff) If so, then, Jesus is enunciating a principle that, however much in advance of its actual promulgation it were stated, would not actually take effect until the Holy Spirit should have come on Pentecost to execute Jesus' will. His teaching given in advance of that moment, then, served to bring His disciples' thinking back to the profounder OT teaching; lest the apparent newness of the revelations to be given later by the Apostles under the guidance of the Spirit be too totally unfamiliar.

Thus, the following statement is Jesus' revelation of how God really regards the dual question of external and spiritual defilement and purity. In this light, then, if the Lord does not expect His people to begin at once to act upon His revelation by their rejecting kosher distinctions, they are at least to begin thinking about it, so that the New Covenant revelations will become the welcome confirmations of these previews.

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man.** The revolutionary significance of this statement can hardly be overestimated, because it amounts to a practical abrogation of the Levitical distinction between clean and unclean foods. (Mk. 7:19) Whereas the abrogation itself would not take effect until Christ's death removed the entire Law of Moses (cf. Ro. 3:20f, 28; 6:14; 7:1, 4, 6; 8:1-4; 10:4; 2 Co. 3:3, 7, 11, 14 etc.), nevertheless, here in the ministry of Jesus is another clear statement of His intent to rescind that ancient norm. And yet, nothing could be clearer, from a careful reading of the OT Law on defilement, than that the physical contact through touching certain objects or eating certain foods definitely defiled the one who did so. (Lev. 11; see note on cleanness and defilement at Mt. 15:2.) The Law included these rules which are altogether ignored by the NT, for these reasons:

1. Because God was dealing with a nation in its infancy with a view to bringing it to maturity and preparedness for the final, perfect revelations of Christ. (Gal. 3:23—4:7)
2. Because Jehovah was dealing with Jews in a specific historical setting in which they were literally surrounded by idolatry with its abominable regulations and orientation, which would compromise the distinctiveness and moral growth of Israel. (Dt. 7) The purpose of the laws of purity and defilement had no immediate or primary connection with either sanitation or health, although these might certainly be secondary considerations. The primary concern was always: "Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any (thing) . . . you shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." (Cf. Lv. 11:44f) Any Hebrew who was really listening to Moses could understand that ceremonial cleansings and abstinence from certain foods had value only insofar as these expressed this fundamental concept. Where the heart was holy, even the ceremonies had value, because God commanded them. Alone, however, these rituals were impotent to produce holiness, since the separation unto the Lord of man's heart is the key factor. If the heart belongs to God through man's personal consecration, all his deeds are clean. (Cf. Tit. 1:15)
3. Because God was furnishing the Christian Church with a foundational vocabulary that defined the concept of personal holiness. (Cf. Peter's citation of Lv. 11:44f in 1 Pt. 1:16; see 1 Th. 4:3-7)

The Law (Word of God) temporarily required these regulations until the time when, having accomplished their purpose, they could be replaced by a more permanent Word from God. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth, then, if He, towering above God's Law, dares to change it? Here is implicit evidence of His essential deity as Author of the OT, evidence that is in perfect harmony with His more explicit claims.

Contrary to the view of some, this passage does not represent a psychological or religious revolution in terms of what God reveals about the things that really affect human existence, because God, both in the Law and through the Prophets, was constantly hammering on the eternal importance of the conditions of man's heart. In fact, Jesus' declaration is but the summation of hundreds of OT sermons which would actually prepare the Hebrew mind to accept just such a statement as that of Jesus here. (Cf. Ps. 5:9; 50; 51; 58:2; 78:36f; Isa. 1:10-20; Jer. 2:22; 4:14; 6:19f; 7:21-26; 11:15; 13:27; 14:9-12; 33:8) How many great prophets and godly men before Jesus had

lamented and condemned Israel's hypocritical ceremonialism because the nation had no vital confidence in God, no real concern to be holy! Remember the great religious reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29-32) and Josiah (2 Chr. 34, 35) and the prophetic preaching like that of Micah (3:11; 6:4-6) or Malachi. (Cf. Am 4:4f; 5:21-24; Joel 2:12-14; Ezek. 14:11; 20:7, 26; 22:24; 23:13, 17, 30; 24:9-14; 33:30-33; 36:17, 20, 24-27)

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.** This is but one sentence, one pithy, memorable proverb, directed to the people, the meaning of which Jesus will later explain to the disciples. (See on vv. 18-20.) Is this verse the substance of an entire message delivered by Jesus at this point? This might be admitted, because it would seem less likely that He would have drawn the crowds into His conversation with the Pharisees just to hear this single sentence. Yet, He could have intentionally thrown this mysterious maxim into the crowd like a live hand grenade, to stir them to reflect on its meaning, question Him further and thus deepen their discipleship as well as their understanding. (See on 13:10; 15:12.) The fact that the Twelve later ask about it proves not only their personal loyalty but also that He had not made it clear to them in the presence of the multitudes.

The Apostle to the Gentiles will develop this concept in the concise Christian axiom: "The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17) By affirming that real purity or defilement is not merely external, but of the heart, the Lord established a principle so fundamental in its application that it not only expressed the radical character and grandeur of Christian freedom as this contrasts with Mosaic restrictions, but it also warns that the standard by which men will be judged is not merely by their outward deeds but by the character of their heart.

### 3. Before the disciples, privately (15:12-20; Mk. 7:17-23)

"When He entered into a house away from the crowd, His disciples questioned Him." (Mk. 7:17) This decisive move permitted the concerned to draw Him out and receive the help His surprising declaration



made necessary.

**15:12 Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying?** The fact that they are worried enough to warn Jesus about possible evil consequences of His position shows that these are real men with real confusions. They are not story-book characters whose bad side should be glossed over. This is a mark of authenticity. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) wonders whether the disciples themselves might not also be scandalized by Jesus' extreme statements. After all, if they had begun to see that Jesus, in theory at least, is removing the proper, Levitical boundaries between clean and unclean meats, even if on any other ground they had no quarrel with Jesus because of the solid character of their trust in His divine credentials that proved His right to speak for God, yet here He dares lay hands upon already well-authenticated revelation from God. So, even though the Pharisees had attacked the disciples personally, still, from the point of view of what the unquestionable Law of God had taught, they surprisingly found themselves on the defensive against Jesus who now seemed to negate a significant part of God's Word. From this standpoint, they found themselves effectively thrown onto the same side with the Pharisees! Their worry is twofold:

1. The question of authority: "In the face of this open rejection and refutation of the Pharisees' position with its consequent affront to these men of light and learning, as well as the religious power of the day, do you adhere to your position?" Here is the fundamental question: who really represents God here? The Pharisees and their traditional theologians who, without any demonstrable evidence of divine authority for nullifying God's explicit orders by their interpretations, or Jesus of Nazareth "a man attested to you by God by many mighty works and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know"? (Cf. Ac. 2:22) How much weight should be given to His credentials, if His message seems to detract from the authority of well-attested revelations in Leviticus? (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20) Humanly speaking, their position is not an easy one.
2. The question of favorably religio-political support: "These are men of considerable power and influence in the nation. Can you successfully wage a significant campaign for religious reform in Israel without their patronage and influence? Must you, through lack of sufficient foresight and tact, lose the all-essential support

of backers like these?" The disciples' view of the Kingdom is measurably mistaken if they believe that the Kingdom's interests can be rightly served by men who habitually nullify the Law of the King, and whose best service to the King is dictated by their own tastes, customs and rules!

Having seen Jesus deliberately break with the popular nationalistic principles of the Zealots' cause (see on 14:22), the disciples probably fear that to enrage these influential scholars would precipitate a tragic end to His program.

**The Pharisees were offended.** Indeed, they had every reason to be shocked and angered, because He dared teach the people doctrine that put in doubt the traditional basis of their customs by exposing revered rabbinical opinions as absurd and ungodly. He discredited their pretended scholarship and popular authority. If He is right, their entire theory of piety is wrong. The rightness of His opposition is in exact proportion to the arrogance of their self-assertion, self-worship and self-complacency. But here is a proper test-case of scandal. (See on Mt. 11:6.) Jesus **MUST** teach the truth and do His duty. If anyone is scandalized by His actions, it is the fault of that individual, but not of him who, in obedience to truth, does his duty. Jesus' justification which follows, explains His attitude toward those theologians.

**15:13 But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planteth not, shall be rooted up.** Two views of the *plant* are possible: (1) traditions; (2) traditionalists.

1. If Jesus means the figure of the *plant not planted* by God, to represent people who nullify God's Word in their teaching and/or practice, then He may be referring to a fact which would actually occur when these very false teachers, who had seemed so formidable to the Apostles, would one day be removed from their positions of influence and authority. In this light, the Lord is warning the Apostles that "the reverend gentlemen from Jerusalem," because they rejected God's truth, would one day be rudely uprooted from their glorious position, whereas, if the Apostles themselves shall have truly honored God's will, would remain in God's field.
2. If, on the other hand, Jesus means to refer to the human traditions, then He is saying that since human tradition does not possess God's authority, it must be eradicated, whereas His own teaching will stand that test. (Cf. Jer. 23, esp. vv. 28, 29) Here Jesus underscores the important distinction between one tradition

and another: who started it? Who or what is its ORIGIN? If God planted it, it will endure. If, on the other hand, it can claim no more than human authority, it is destined to be removed from consideration and must be evaluated from that standpoint. Its value is decided on the basis of origins.

In practice, it is unimportant which of these interpretations is the better, because beliefs can never really be distinguished from those who teach them, because what they believe makes them what they are. People are to be identified with, and judged by, the doctrines they say they believe in. (Remember what Jesus said about the interrelation of heart and doctrine in Mt. 13. See notes on 13:38b, c.) Jesus had already taught that not all the plants growing in the Kingdom are of His sowing, hence, not all please Him. (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43; cf. 1 Th. 2:15)

Is it urgent here to decide WHO would do the uprooting? Is it God? Jesus? the apostles? Time? In our text Jesus Himself furnishes the sickles and shovels whereby the Apostles and Christians anywhere might *root up* ALL teaching that does not square with God's Word, is done without divine authority or approval, by comparing it with the Bible, by recognizing the tendency of human opinions to nullify some Word from God. Further, by implication, Jesus defends His duty to attack and root out what is false, corrupting and positively dangerous for the growth of *what my heavenly Father planted*.

In fact, implicit in Jesus' words is the suggestion that there is at least one kind of plant which the heavenly Father DID plant, that shall never be rooted up. Is it not the Kingdom with its doctrine and its believers? It is to be a Kingdom in which Mosaic legislation about impurity of any sort other than moral is to have no part. In contrast to rabbinic notions of the importance of their own hoary traditions, it is to be a Kingdom in which the Father's Word is to be the only standard. In contrast to scribal contempt for publicans and sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles and women, it is to be a Kingdom that embraces all who bow before the King and joyfully do anything He says. Naturally, as Maurice (PHC, Vol. XXII, 382) has it,

The most natural and necessary antagonists of it were the sects; that Sadducees and Pharisees hated it equally; that they saw in it the destruction of the sect-principle. . . . There is a plant in your heart and mine which our heavenly Father has not planted, and which must be rooted out. It is that same plant of self-seeking, of

opinionativeness, of party-spirit, which has shed its poison over the church and over the world.

## NOTES ON CATHOLIC TRADITIONS

Study the "new" Catholicism as this denomination is revealed in her *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*. Following is my translation from Italian of excerpts from the document *Dei Verbum*, Chapter II: "On the Transmission of the Divine Revelation." Compare these assertions with Judaism's attitude toward tradition and traditional authority to teach God's Word.

. . . The Apostles, so that the Gospel might always be preserved complete and alive in the Church, then left the Bishops as their successors, entrusting to them their own personal position as teachers (*suum ipsorum locum magisterii*). This Sacred Tradition, therefore, and the Sacred Scriptures of both testaments are as one mirror in which the Church, pilgrim on earth, contemplates God . . . Meanwhile, the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, had to be preserved by continuous succession until the end of time. Therefore, the Apostles, committing that which they themselves had received, admonish the faithful to hold to the traditions which they had received either by word of mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15), and to contend for that faith which had been once for all delivered to them (cf. Jude 3) . . .

This Tradition of apostolic origin progresses (*proficit*) in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti*): in fact the comprehension grows both of the things as well as of the words handed down, both by means of the meditation and study of the believers who meditate upon them in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19 and 51), and by means of the experience that derives from a deeper understanding of spiritual things, as well as by the preaching of those who, along with the episcopal succession, received a certain charisma of truth (*ex paeconio eorum qui cum episcopatus successione charisma veritatis certum acceperunt*). The Church, that is, in the course of the centuries, incessantly tends toward the fulness of the divine truth, until the words of God be brought to (or come to) perfection (*donec in ipsa consummentur verba Dei*).

The assertions of the Holy Fathers attest the life-giving presence of this Tradition, the riches of which are transfused into the practice and life of the Church that believes and that prays. It is the same Tradition that causes the Church to know the entire canon of the Sacred Books, and, in her, causes to understand more profoundly and animates the Sacred Letters themselves (*et indesinenter actuosae reddentur*); thus, God who spoke in the past, does not cease to speak with the Bride of His Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit, by means of whose voice the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, by whose means (it resounds) in the world, leads the believers to all the truth and causes the word of Christ to dwell in them in all its richness (cf. Col. 3:16).

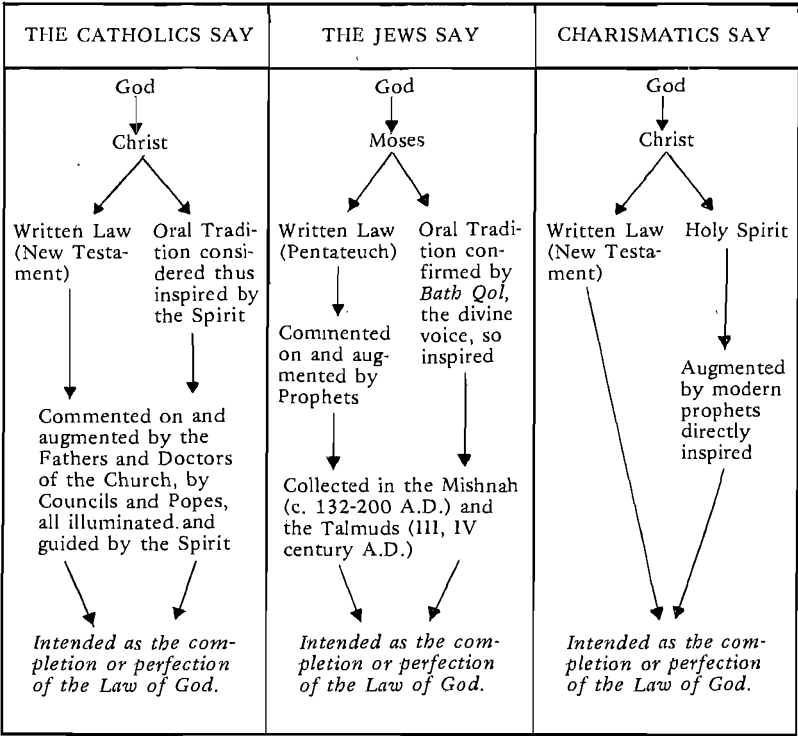
The Sacred Tradition therefore and the Holy Scriptures are bound closely together and are communicating between them. Since both spring from the same divine origin, they form, in a certain sense, one thing and tend toward the same goal. In fact, the Sacred Scripture is the word of God, because written by the inspiration of the Spirit of God; the word of God, entrusted by Christ and by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, is entirely transmitted by the Sacred Tradition to their successors, so that these, illuminated by the Spirit of truth (*prae lucente Spiritu veritatis*), might preserve it faithfully by their preaching, expound and publish it; and thus it is that the Church bases its certainty about all the things revealed, not upon the Scripture alone (*non per solam Sacram Scripturam hauriat*). Therefore the one and the other must be considered worthy of veneration with equal pious affection and reverence (*Quapropter utraque pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipienda et veneranda est.*).

The Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scripture constitute one sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church . . .

The Office of interpreting authentically the word of God, written or handed down (*verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum*) is entrusted only to the living Magisterium (i.e. Teaching Authority) of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Teaching Authority (Magisterium), however, is not superior to the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed down, since, by divine mandate and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*ex divino mandato et Spiritu Sancto assistente*), it piously heeds, holily guards and faithfully expounds that word, and from this one deposit of the faith draws forth all that it proposes to believe as revealed by God.

It is clear, therefore, that the Sacred Tradition, the Sacred Scripture and the Teaching Authority of the Church (Magisterium), by the supremely wise counsel of God are so thoroughly connected and joined together as not to be able to stand independently, and all together, each in its own way, under the action of one Holy Spirit, effectively contribute to the salvation of souls.

Compare the Catholic, the Jewish and the Charismatic views;



15:14 **Let them alone.** (*âfete*, 2 Aorist imperative, 2nd person plural of *afiemî*) This expression is made problematic by the broad meaning-potential of the word: “let go, send away; 2 cancel, remit, pardon; 3 Literally; leave, abandon; Figuratively, give up, abandon; 4 Let, let go, tolerate; allow, let, permit.” (Arndt-Gingrich, 12Sf)

Because the verb-form is second plural, we must reject with reluctance the construction, suggested by A.B. Bruce (*Training*, 84), whereby these words are seen as the disciples' advice to Jesus: "Let them alone, Jesus!" Otherwise, the words bounced back to the disciples would have probably been expressed in the second person singular verb-form. We must understand the plural as really addressed to the disciples.

Jesus' meaning, based upon the meaning-potential of this verb, might be:

1. *Divorce* them from your thinking. Their doctrine is not permanent, because it is not God's.
2. *Pardon* them their offense at the truth I teach. They are wrongly scandalized, but I am not backing down. From this standpoint, He not only places Himself above the scribes, i.e. in a position to overlook their offense; He actually requires that the disciples rise to the position where they can remit or cancel, as far as their own feelings are concerned, this false scandal of the rabbis. Jesus Himself certainly did not hold this particular attack against the Pharisees, because He continued vigorously to attempt to convince them, even if this meant exposing their hypocrisy and opposing their doctrine. The Apostles would later be engaged in public debate with Judaizers clear until the fall of Jerusalem.
3. *Give up* on the Pharisees, because they are incorrigible. Stop worrying about what they think, because there comes a time when you must "shake the dust off your feet against them" and abandon them to their wilful blindness and self-chosen fate.
4. *Tolerate* the Pharisees as individuals, because we are dealing with the evils of their system, not attacking them personally. By temporarily tolerating them, we may actually grant them the mercy to reflect and repent, if some of them will. (Cf. 13:30!) *Tolerate* them until their blindness reaches its culmination and they are toppled into destruction along with all who agree with them.

Does it matter which of these suggestions is correct? In all of them runs Jesus' sound advice: "Do not be overly excited about their approval or unfavorable opinion of my teaching or program, for they shall fall. God guarantees their condemnation, regardless of their apparently powerful influence and their presently great authority. Above all, do not fear them!" (Cf. Lk. 12:1-12; Mt. 10:16ff, 26-33) The Pharisees' spiritual condition, with its self-willed blindness and

stubborn hypocrisy, its deliberate adherence to human traditions rather than love for God and His revelations, fully justifies His (and, consequently, their) abandoning them to their just condemnation.

**They are blind guides.** Jesus never once denied that these Pharisees are *guides*, furnished with scholarship, credentials and an impressive following. What is really comforting to the disciples is His confident assertion that they, who claim the exclusive vision of the truth and the unique right to lead Israel in her worship and service to God, are really *blind*. (See notes on 13:13-17.) *Blind*, in this case, means biased, prejudiced so as to be unable to grasp truth, however evident it might be. Truth, according to these imperturbable bigots, is not to be found outside their vain opinions. This assertion of Jesus comforts the disciples, because they begin to see that the formidable specter presented by these religious scholars did not represent ultimate reality, because **THEIR EYES**, and those of their followers however numerous, **WERE CLOSED TO IT**. The real issue is always whether Jesus' disciples really believe that Jesus is the God-sent Guide who can see to lead His people safely back to God.

*Blind guides*: if their boast of their knowledge of the Law qualified them to be Rabbis, "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness" (Ro. 2:17-24), what a shock to hear them described as the tragic perversion of their high calling! Worse still was their total unconsciousness of their self-chosen blindness, confounded by their pretense to be able to see. (Cf. Jn. 9:40f) What blindness to be unable to discern the futility of zeal and diligence in activities intended to justify oneself before God but which were totally uncalled for by God! They were *blind guides*, because they knew perfectly well what God said in the Law, but still thought they had a right to have their own way. ("God commanded . . . But you say . . ." vv. 4, 5) The Apostles had not yet understood that all that even great, learned authorities affirm with unhesitating confidence must be compared with God's message, and should their notions be found inconsistent with His, they may be safely discarded without fear of losing something of value or permanence. (Cf. Ac. 4:19f)

**And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.** The crushing irony here is that these very *blind guides* are themselves *the blind* followers of those ancient elders whose traditions they held in such reverential honor, because they followed them blindly, unconcerned about how far from the way of truth, righteousness and true godliness those completely human ordinances would lead them.

**Both shall fall into a pit.** Blind followers **ARE** responsible for what



they believe. However much they may be influenced by false leaders, they are lost. Thus, false religious teaching or mistaken religious leaders actually take sincere followers along with them to their destruction. (Study notes on 7:13-24, 28.) If a man believes himself to be in need of leadership but freely and deliberately chooses as leader another man who himself needs correction, he deserves the tragedy that will be his. (Jer. 14:14-16; 20:6; 28:15f; Isa. 9:16; Ezek. 14:9-11) McGarvey (Matthew-Mark, 136) rightly counsels:

He should choose a leader who can see, and as there is no leader who can see all the way that we have to travel except Jesus, let us take his word as our only guide, going only as it leads us.

Despite our felt need for human teachers to help us along toward truth (cf. Ac. 8:31; 1 Co. 4:15; Eph. 4:11), we should follow no man, except as he follows Christ. (1 Co. 11:1; 4:16)

15:15 **And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.** Evidently, Peter is the spokesman for the disciples who had become uneasy about Jesus' indifference toward the violent reaction of the religious leaders. In fact, the sharp rebuke Jesus administers is in the plural ("ye"), hence, addressed to the group Peter represents. (15:16)

What expression of Jesus' seemed so obscure to Peter that he described it as *the parable*? Whereas in Matthew there are two germ parables in the context, i.e. that of the rooted up plants (v. 13) and that of the blind guides (v. 14), Mark's version omits these two by passing directly from the public statement about internal defilement to the explanation of this *parable*. (Mk. 7:14-17) So Peter is requesting clearer information about this enigmatic public statement. (Mt. 15:11 = Mk. 7:15)

NOTE: Here is further evidence that *parable* in NT language, does not always refer necessarily to a one-point illustration, as required by modern rhetoric. The *parable* referred to by Peter is: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (v. 11) The only way to consider this a one-point illustration is to suppose either that Jesus actually said more, which is, of course, possible, or that Peter sees this sentence as picturing an incomplete story teaching a moral about a man who ate some food that did not defile him. Then there was that unclear part about what came out of his mouth that defiled him. It is better, however, to see *parable* in

Peter's usage here as meaning: "a terse, ingeniously expressed thought, whose meaning is partially hidden by its brevity and partly by its form and content." What Peter does not understand—for whatever reason—he calls a *parable* (*parabolén*).

Nevertheless, in the declaration referred to (v. 11), there is a feature that is common to parables: real truth is expressed by literal symbols, invisible ideas are symbolized by visible images. In this case moral defilement of the heart is symbolized by something coming out of one's mouth. Peter's question is not totally groundless, because, without further explanation or previous insight, it would not be clear what it is that comes out of a man's mouth, when it was food that went in.

**15:16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding?** If Jesus' rebuke seems exaggerated by contrast to a simple request for information of what was unclear, it must be measured against the much private information and exceptional opportunity that had already been given these very close disciples. (Cf. 15:12) They are not simply part of "the people" (Mt. 15:10; Mk. 7:14, 17) whom Jesus often left on the outer fringe so long as they chose not to become closer disciples. (Cf. Mt. 13:10-17) There is an emphatic sting in each of the words: *Are you also — even yet — without understanding?* because of the implied contrast with all others. Despite the pretended authority of the Jerusalem scholars, these refused to learn from Jesus, so remained *without understanding*, and rightly so. The crowds who asked no questions and wanted no answers were *also without understanding*. But what justification could the Apostles muster for their inability to see the far-reaching implications of His great revolutionary declaration? Even if their main difficulty is their inability to admit that this basic element of Mosaic legislation can be eliminated once the fundamental purpose for its original enactment had been fulfilled, what excuse could cover their failure to admit Jesus to be the Lawgiver Himself and fully empowered to change, correct or even abolish His own Law? Or should they fail to hold so exalted an estimate of their Master, they are also *without understanding* of even the basic concepts taught both in the Law and prophets which God intended all Israel to understand. (See on 15:10f.) Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 216) is right to admonish: "Christ expects from us some proportion of knowledge, and grace, and wisdom, according to the time and means we have had. See Jn. 14:9; Heb. 5:12; 2 Ti. 3:7f."

**15:17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught?** The Lord describes here the normal functioning of the alimentary canal: common food passes from one part of the digestive system to the other and what cannot be assimilated is eliminated. Because He is speaking generally, those substances that are positively harmful to the body are not considered here. However, normal food is used in the body for its strength, but this process does not defile the body, because the moral state of a man is not really based upon the material or the mechanical. That is, purely physical processes, which have no relation to the will, the intellect, the emotions, or the conscience, can never really pollute or profane the heart. There is no proper connection, no real affinity between material food *per se* and the soul.

It is because of this objective lack of affinity, therefore, that Jesus can affirm that food, any food, is objectively "clean, pure." The Levitical system was, thus, an arbitrary law that forbade the eating of certain foods so that the Israelites might learn holiness through obedience to these arbitrary laws. The defilement, involved in eating foods declared unclean, lay not in the objective impurity of those foods, but in a Hebrew's disregarding God's law by requesting and justifying his eating of that food. Lenski (*Matthew*, 589, 592) is right to say that "forbidden meats could be eaten only by a Jew who was set on disobeying God's Levitical law," but he draws a wrong conclusion therefrom when he denies that Jesus intended "no abrogation of the Levitical laws concerning meats." In fact, when Jesus declares the objective purity of ALL foods (Mk. 7:19), He says the opposite of the food laws which said "some meats are impure." So He is actually undermining any consideration of the Levitical distinctions as absolute. By going back of the subjective impurity of certain foods to the objective purity of all foods, Jesus is going back of the Levitical rules that established that subjective impurity, and effectively cancels the distinctions they created. But, by so doing, He rises above the Levitical system and dares say something different than it had said. Mark (7:19) does not want his readers to miss that connection, but Matthew, sensitive to the biases of his readership, does not want to close their mind to the more important truth he wants to get across. He knows that if they accept Jesus as Lord, Messiah and revealer of God, they will, in time, see that He can erase Levitical rules too. (Cf. Ac. 10:10-16; 11:9)

Jesus' declaration expresses His fundamental confidence in the basic goodness of God's creation, as over against an ascetic tendency

to suspect certain aspects of God's creation as intrinsically contaminating or profaning. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Gen. 1:31; 9:3; Ro. 14:2, 6; 1 Co. 10:25-30; Ac. 10:28)

True enough, "an inordinate appetite, intemperance, and excess in eating; come out of the heart, and are defiling." (M. Henry, Vol. V, 216) Further, while it is true that foods do have their effect on the body and cannot be regarded as having absolutely no effect, Jesus, however, is discussing what will defile man's soul, not discussing health or simple sanitation. Even if the precise food laws affected by Jesus' declaration might yet be followed as a question of "health and hygiene and common sense and medical wisdom" (Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 131), after they were abrogated at the cross, they could never remain in vigor as a question of conscience to disturb the soul.

This basic character of Judaism, as opposed to true, OT religion, whereby the former pitted ritual purity against ethical purity at the expense of the latter and seen in the tendency to multiply regulations for external self-abasement, is all too easily reproduced in the Church. (Study 1 Ti. 4:1-5; Col. 2:8-23.) Paul's whole argument in Col. 2, 3 is that man cannot achieve life with a holy God by strict adherence to human regulations, precepts and doctrines which, however wisely they appear to promote rigor of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body, have no value in dealing with the root cause of fleshly indulgence. This must come from a new mind-set.

**15:18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man.** This is probably the profoundest declaration on mind-pollution. Nothing pours out of the mind through one's speech but what was first put there. The great issue, then, is what is getting into a man's mind? This is why propaganda in all its forms, both good and bad, is a life-changing activity, since man's conduct is deeply affected by whatever is in his mind. (Cf. Staton, *The Perfect Balance*, 79f)

What does this say about the Pharisees' failure to let the Word of God so completely permeate their thinking that they were able to miss seeing their flagrant violation of God's holy commandment? Where had they failed to teach the proper concern for one's aged, needy parents? They had failed to keep ALL of God's message in mind, both with its emphasis on parental care, as well as its emphasis on giving to God what had been promised. These theological bunglers failed to maintain that nice balance which God had placed in tension. Consequently, they concentrated on only a portion of the truth, and

this imbalance produced the travesty of truth that Jesus exposes here. He attacks it because He is sure that half-truth cannot make a man whole, and the resulting self-deception, ignorance and conceit is the fatal source of sin in all its expressions. (Study Psa. 119:9, 11, 44f, 104, 130, 165; Col. 3:16; Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19.) The Pharisees were so terribly wrong, because they had filled man's vision of God with a dedication to ceremonials, externals and details, rather than with the knowledge of God, mercy, justice and faithfulness. (Hos. 6:6; Mt. 23:23; Phil. 4:8)

**The things which proceed out of the mouth** means "words," of course, and these really *defile the man*. Man's thoughts and intentions shape them into the creatures they are before they are ever expressed verbally. In fact, it is not essential that one's plans ever be vocalized for them to pollute his heart and life. (Cf. Mt. 5:22, 28) Whereas by the very nature of food, whatever does not assimilate into the body is eliminated, the nature of sinful words and attitudes produces, unfortunately, quite another result, because whatever is produced in the soul (*psychè*) influences the character and blights every human expression. This finds confirmation on the positive side of human experience, because Jesus states it as a general rule that a "good man out of his good treasure brings forth good." (Mt. 12:33-37) Good also begins in the mind. (Phil. 4:8; cf. Mt. 7:17f; Lk. 6:43-45) *The heart* is all that, taken together, composes the entire man: his desires, his conscience, his will, his intellect, his memory, his habits, his temperament. *They defile the man*: the only defilement worth discussing is that of an evil, unregenerate mind, because this is the true source of those thoughts, words and deeds that offend against God's Law. (Cf. Jas. 1:13-15; Jer. 17:9; see on 15:19.)

Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) astutely notices that "it is not the disciples that defile themselves with what they eat, but the Pharisees that defile themselves with what they speak spitefully and censoriously of them." It is so easy to defile ourselves by transgressing God's Law against censoriousness, while we criticize others for their transgressions of His Law. There are no neutral words that do not count: they must positively bless others or they defile the person who says them. (Col. 3:16; 4:6; Eph. 4:29; 5:4; 1 Pt. 3:15, 16; Jas. 3:10)

**15:19 For:** the principle stated in v. 18 is now to be explained and amplified. **Out of the heart come forth evil thoughts:** this does not state a law of permanent depravity that excludes the possibility of any good as coming from the heart as such, because the Lord Himself

also affirmed the latter. He means here that evil thoughts and all their effects come from the heart, not from some missed ceremony or bungled ritual. Since a wicked heart is the poison fountain whence this pollution pours, if His hearers desire to alter the character of what comes from their hearts, they must have a **NEW HEART!** Jesus' statement only becomes an unchangeable law for those who refuse to change the character of their entire being by total conversion to Christ. (Cf. Heb. 3:12f)

**Evil thoughts** are the father of the deeds that make up this defiling catalog. In fact, were these never the subject of man's daydreams nor the object of his desires, they could never surface as deeds, because they would have died abortively.

NOTE: Mark introduces only "evil thoughts" with definite articles ("the thoughts, i.e. the evil ones") whereas he seems to place all the other sins in apposition to them, hence without articles, as if the latter are to be considered as the natural expression "evil thoughts," which is, of course, what Jesus affirmed explicitly.

Since the sins listed begin with, and are the expression of *evil thoughts*, we must beware of "an itching interest" in them, lest our own steadfastness be compromised by our own apparent conscientiousness which may be nothing but a lusty curiosity that loves to dwell on the details. (Eph. 5:12 in context) For this reason we must be set straight by Jesus on these subjects, that we might have His power for our self-defense against them.

In order to include Mark's additions, Matthew's list has been reorganized to capture certain groupings that reveal how the acts externalize the *evil thoughts*:

1. **HATEFUL THOUGHTS.** *Murder* is but the external manifestation of hate latent in the heart. (See notes on 5:21f; cf. Jas. 4:1f; Psa. 55:21; 1 Jn. 3:15.) An *evil eye* (*ofthalmòs poneròs*) means that jealous envy that broods hate, because unable or unwilling to rejoice in the good fortune of another and wishing to deprive him of it.
2. **SENSUAL THOUGHTS.** *Adultery* (*moicheîai*) differs from *fornication* (*porneîai*) in that the former refers in this context to extra-marital sexual relations, while the latter refers to premarital relations, but both are natural products of a lusty heart. (See notes on 5:27-32.) Mark (7:22) adds "licentiousness" (*asélgeia*) whose

range of meaning includes: "debauchery, sensuality, especially of sexual excesses" (Arndt-Gingrich, 114) as well as "dissoluteness, insolence, shamelessness, coarseness, arrogance" (Rocci, 277). See 2 Pt. 2:14a.

3. DISCONTENTED THOUGHTS. *Theft* (*klopai*) is born of a desire to possess something without which it cannot rest content until it is taken. Mark (7:22) adds "coveting" (*pleonexiai*), which is the insatiable greed that leads to *theft*, and many other soul-piercing evils as well. (Cf. 1 Ti. 6:6-10) There are degrees of greed in everyone, that are in direct proportion to the degree we content ourselves with what God provides. (Heb. 13:5f) Greed expresses the real idolatry in the heart. (Col. 3:5) The whole spirit of "covetousness" defiles, because people do not want to be satisfied to live without all the products promoted by industry. They must "have more" (*pleon + exia*), even if someone else must pay the bills.
4. UNCHARITABLE THOUGHTS. *False witness* (*pseudomartyriai*) may be prompted by inner fear to represent openly what is known to be otherwise than is declared, as well as by the hate that gives testimony that deliberately damages an innocent person. Mark (7:22) notes also "deceit" (*dòlos*) which points to that cunning treachery and stealth by which one intentionally deceives others. (See 2 Pt. 2:14; Psal. 62:10.)
5. BLASPHEMOUS THOUGHTS. *Slander* (*blasfemiai*) is a degrading, derogating kind of speech often produced by maliciousness or bitterness, whether directed at God or man. (cf. Jas. 3:9) At its heart is pride and censuring criticism. (See on 7:1-5.) It engenders and is also produced by false witness to which it is necessarily kin.
6. PERVERSE THOUGHTS. "Wickednesses" (Mark 7:22 *poneriai*) in the "plural speaks of various kinds of evil-mindedness and individual expressions of it, malicious acts" (Arndt-Gingrich, 697); "perversity" (Rocci, 1539)
7. VAIN THOUGHTS. "Pride" (Mk. 7:22, *hyperefania*) refers to haughtiness and arrogance (Arndt-Gingrich, 849) which includes insolence, contempt and scorn (Rocci, 1895). Pride is always wrong when it is pride in man, his position, his accomplishments—anything but the living God. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:31)
8. THOUGHTLESS THOUGHTS. "Foolishness" (Mk. 7:22, *afrosùne*) speaks of a lack of moral and intellectual sense that borders on insanity, but is caused by indifference and imprudence. (Rocci,

326) Moral recklessness is not merely foolish; it is sin. (Prov. 24:9)

From the above it is evident that, whereas human law can judge a man on the basis of what he actually does, never on the basis of his attitude except as this expresses itself in deeds, God's judgment tests everything by man's motives or intentions before they ever lead him to act or speak as he does.

15:20 **These defile the man**, says Jesus. God is no ogre who forbids something conducive to man's well-being and best interest, when He demands moral purity. He knows that this contributes to what is right for man, his health and strength. Therefore, that lack of self-discipline which refuses to remove these causes of real defilement invites not only self-pollution, but, finally, self-destruction. This is why we must learn to hate sin and its defilement of our conscience, its pollution of our dearest relationships, its vitiation of our highest motives. The trouble with the Pharisees was that they did not hate sin. They only hated to see any of their opinions discounted. Since their conscience had been so long accustomed to insist upon ceremonies of human origin and to being intransigent sticklers for something that never really mattered at all, their mind was impossible to arouse by any discussion of real defilement. But are we moderns personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of a holy God? Do we really glorify God for His power to cleanse us? (Cf. Ps. 51)

Merely because the NT repealed and removed the OT legislation on defilement and cleansing, it did not thereby make everything right and innocent without qualification. Study the following texts: Ro. 14:14, 20 and Tit. 1:15 in harmony with Jas. 3:6; 4:8; 1 Co. 3:17; 8:7; Heb. 12:15; Ro. 1:24; 6:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3, 5; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Th. 2:3; 4:7; 2 Co. 7:1; 12:21; 2 Pt. 1:4; 2:10. Again, since sin *defiles the man*, real cleansing must be able to remove this real defilement. (Study Ac. 8:22; 15:9; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 2:14; 3:5; Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 3:21; 1 Jn. 1:5-9.) The OT legislation merely furnished us the vocabulary and strengthened our moral muscles to walk and talk with God in perfect sanctity of flesh and spirit. The concept of purity and pollution taught us in the OT Law has not been forgotten, but elevated, strengthened and made far more imperative. The details whereby the concept is to be practiced differ, because we are not under the Mosaic Levitical system, but the concept of personal holiness is as fully obligatory as it is fully Christian.



J. Parker (*PHC*, Vol. XXII, 383) summarizes the proper application of this section to Christian practice:

So long as we think we can wash the evil off our hands in any one of the world's rivers, we do not feel our want of a gospel. That want is felt only in proportion to our conviction that sin is in our very souls, that it penetrates every fibre, and poisons every spring and energy of our being.

This is why this section is so fundamental: modern Christians may not observe a hand-washing tradition whereby they hope to justify themselves before God and be able to live among men, but whatever they invent or accept as handed down to them from "the fathers" is totally inadequate to make them all God wants them to be. It may be positively damaging in that it nullifies what God required, and, as a religious exercise, it threatens to blind their mind to what really separates man from God and destroys human communion.

We would entirely miss the real meaning of this passage if we but substituted other human rules whereby we would avoid becoming Pharisees, but failed to do the one thing necessary for real, lasting cleansing from all defilement of flesh and spirit. Morgan (*Matthew*, 197) ponders:

Is our religion a thing of the heart, a communion between our inner life and God, a force that drives us to the watch-tower in the morning to catch a gleam of the glory of the pathway of His feet, a passion that sends us back to Him with shame and disgust when we have sinned? That is the true religion. If Jesus in all the virtue of His life and love sits sentinel in our heart, we shall guard our lips, and be careful as to what we eat or drink . . .

We shall be careful to do anything He asks, without artful dodging our duty by sham regulations and great zeal for meaningless rituals invented to measure our piety.

**But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.** Merely because Jesus placed hand-washing as a religious ritual in the category of things indifferent is no excuse for "hippy Christians" as if what is important is what people do, not what they look or smell like. In no sense did He approve of indifference to the use and abuse of food and drink, or indifference toward personal cleanliness and filth. Rather, His principle means that all these matters are fully expressions of our tastes, inclinations, desires, choices and will—in short, the character of our heart. The very reasons why some choose to be

filthy in dress or hygiene may be very defiling because these involve the sins of lack of concern for the conscience and feelings of others, the refusal properly to reflect the image of God in one's own person, and perhaps other sins as well.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the worship of God. What is worship? What kind is acceptable or unacceptable to God? How did Old Testament worship differ from New Testament worship? What are the essential elements of worship?
2. Describe briefly the Jewish traditions concerning purification. Include Mark's brief summary. What was the original foundation of these ideas? Why did Jesus violate them? Was there any difference between Jesus' teachings on defilement and the God-given teaching in the OT? How much and why?
3. What was the OT teaching concerning defilement and purification? Was ceremonial defilement a serious matter in the OT? What was the usual method for obtaining cleansing from defilement under the OT Law?
4. Why and how did Jesus violate the traditional rules of the elders? Who were these elders?
5. What did Jesus say was wrong with the Jewish traditions?
6. What are traditions? Are there some that are good to keep? If so, which? If not, why are there none which are good?
7. Where did the Pharisees and scribes come from who place this critical question before Jesus? What is significant about their presence in Galilee at this time? What is significant about their attack now?
8. Outline chronologically the events that occurred during this general period from the Sermon on the Mount up to and including the clash with the Pharisees over traditions. Where did this latter occur?
9. What does the word "Corban" mean and how was it used by the Jews?
10. How did Jesus offend the Pharisees? What does the word "offend" mean?
11. List the statements or facts in this section that reveal the unique, supernatural identity of Jesus.
12. Whom did Jesus call "blind guides"? What does Jesus mean

by telling His disciples to "let them alone"? Was He letting them alone?

13. What did Jesus mean by the parable about blind followers of blind guides?
14. Summarize the total answer Jesus gave to the question of the Pharisees: "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?"
15. What did Jesus say really pollutes, or defiles, a man? What is the real source of all wickedness? List the things which Jesus named that actually defile a man and give a clear, brief definition of each.
16. What other NT passages discuss cleanness, pollution, purity and filth? Are there any things that are now tabù in Christianity?
17. Make a list of American tabùs that have found their way into American Christianity, but have no necessary origin in the religion of Jesus. This requires more insight than most of us think or have, but give it a try. But once you have finished making the list, realize that this is but a modern, American version of "the traditions of the elders."
18. What is the point of Jesus' statement about plants that God did not plant?
19. What method of cleansing is available to us, or is there anything we can or must do to be cleansed of our defilement?
20. What is the significance of Mark's statement (7:19) about Jesus' "making all meats clean"?
21. Describe pure, undefiled religion.
22. What opinion did the Pharisees have of Jesus to attack Him as often as they dared? Why did they feel this way?

### HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A PHARISEE

Who would WANT to be a Pharisee after all Jesus had to say about them? Ironically, however, for all our abhorrence of their mentality, we may well find ourselves entrapped by inattention to what made the Pharisee what he was. What element(s) stand out; what factors best describe the hideous distortion of true religion that we should identify with the Pharisean mentality? Is it hypocrisy? Superficiality? Pride? Self-worship? Punctiliousness? Proselyting? Self-righteousness? But are not all of these and more but indications of a fault

far deeper and more essential, a fault so basic that facilitates all the others? That fault is the fundamental confusion of one's own opinions and traditions for the Word of God. Therefore, if we would avoid the rise of Phariseism in our selves, we need to take the following steps:

## I. WE MUST BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE THE TRADITIONALIST MENTALITY.

What is the "traditionalist mentality?" How do wrong traditions get started and perpetuated anyway? Someone gets a good idea about how to understand or apply God's will. Others like it, and soon it becomes the POPULAR way to interpret the passage. It is only a small step for this understanding to become the ONLY way to think about that particular point or the only way to do it. In time, the good reasons for the ideas are forgotten or become unimportant, or, they may even be no longer valid. The idea, however, continues to be promoted and perpetuated for itself, with no more support for it than its antiquity or its acceptance by people whose opinion is valued. Neglect of the idea becomes equivalent to neglect of the very Word of God it was intended to interpret and apply. At this point it is nothing but a habitual, ritualistic way of reacting. In fact, no thinking dare be done about it, for this would compromise one's orthodoxy in the eyes of those who unquestioningly accept the idea. Rethinking or re-evaluating the idea is the ultimate heresy, because to do so appears to question the goodness or rightness of the idea at its inception: "After all, our authorities must have had a good reason for accepting the idea in the first place, or they would not have taught it!" First, then, we see the unwillingness and/or the inability to examine critically the validity of one's own traditions, customs, opinions or interpretations. But the "traditionalist mentality" involves something more deadly than this.

The "traditionalist mentality" expresses a deep-rooted indifference toward those means whereby men may recognize the Word of God, distinguishing it from every other communication. The confirmed traditionalist cares more about maintaining the status quo than about distinguishing good traditions from those which are tendentious and false. In short, he presumes that everything he believes, does or teaches is automatically guaranteed valid by divine inspiration and enjoys the same divine authority characteristic of well-authenticated

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revelations, even though his views do not possess all the qualities demanded of messages revealed by authentic prophets. God has taught us, however, that His genuine revelations will be unveiled by prophets possessing the following characteristic credentials:

1. The true messenger of God must speak in the name of the Lord God of Israel, Javéh, in contrast with so-called "revelations" coming from any other source. (Dt. 18:9-22; Jer. 26:16)
2. The true prophet will offer supernatural credentials that cannot be falsified, either in the form of immediate, visible miracles, or predictive prophecies which, when precisely fulfilled, provide indisputable proof of the prophet's divine mandate. (Dt. 18:22; Ex. 4:1-9, 21, 29-31; 1 Kg. 18:36-38; 13:1-6; 14:1-18; Mt. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 12:12; Jn. 10:37f; 14:10f)
3. The true messenger of God must speak in harmony with the well-authenticated revelations which become the norm by which to judge all new revelations. (Isa. 8:16, 20; Jer. 26 esp. vv. 18, 20; 1 Co. 14:29) The older revelations constitute a "prophetic context" within which to evaluate all later ones. Remember the appeal of Jesus and the Apostles to the harmony existing between their own affirmations and the message of Moses and the prophets. (Cf. Ac. 26:22f; 17:11; 13:27-41; 15:15; 17:2; 18:28; 26:6f; 28:23; Ro. 1:2-5; 3:21; 2 Pt. 3:2)
4. The personal morality of the prophet should harmonize with his message. (Cf. 2 Co. 12:12; Mt. 7:16-20; Jn. 8:46) However, this characteristic may not always be present, since, for specific purposes and situations. God can make use of those who, at last, turn out to be wicked prophets. (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Nu. 22-24; 1 Kg. 13:11-32; Ezek. 14:1-11; Mt. 7:22f; 1 Co. 9:27)

What does not occur to the traditionalist, who imagines his human opinions, interpretations and traditions to have been inspired or dictated by God, is the fact that the original proponents of these very traditional opinions not only did not possess the above-mentioned prophetic credentials, but actually opened the door to direct apostasy from the living God and His true word. But the traditionalist seems immune to the following God-given defences against imposture:

1. If a predicted sign or wonder does not occur, the prophet has spoken presumptuously. (Dt. 18:21f; contrast 1 Sam. 3:19f)
2. If a prophet dares speak in the name of some other deity, he has not been authorized by Javéh. (Dt. 18:20)

3. Notwithstanding the verification of a true miracle done by a given prophet, if that prophet teaches apostacy from the Lord, he is false, (Dt. 13:1-5) This is also true of every type of false or wicked counsel or counsellor who, however not possessing divine credentials, already enjoys the confidence of those who must decide about him. (Dt. 13:6-18) "Apostacy" may include his ignoring the well-established "prophetic context" of genuine revelation. If his message will not harmonize with the undoubted Word of God, he is false.

Worse still, the traditionalist who embraces uncritically the claims or opinions of ANY so-called prophet, "inspired" tradition or "teaching authority guided by the Holy Spirit," by that act unwittingly relinquishes the definitive character of the Christian Gospel as the normative revelation of the will of God, i.e. as the now finally completed "prophetic context." The NT speaks of:

1. Itself as "the sound doctrine," "the pattern of sound words" (1 Ti. 1:10f; 4:1-6, 11, 16; 5:21; 6:1-4; 2 Ti. 1:13; 4:3f; Tit. 1:9; 2:1, 10, 15)
2. The importance of holding fast to the Apostolic documents and messages. (1 Ti. 1:3; 3:14f; 2 Ti. 2:2; 3:16f; 2 Th. 2:14; 3:6, 14)
3. The authority of the Apostles' doctrine. (Ro. 16:17; 1 Co. 2:6-16; 14:37; 2 Co. 12:1-12; Gal. 1:6-9, 12; Eph. 3:3-5; 1 Th. 2:13; 4:2, 8, 15, 18; 2 Pt. 3:2, 15f; 1 Pt. 1:12; 2 Jn. 10)
4. The decisive, conclusive and final character of the revelation completed during the lifetime of the Apostles themselves: (Heb. 1:1, 2; 2 Pt. 1:3f, 12; Jude 3; Ro. 16:17)
5. The danger of accepting as apostolic tradition some declaration that never was taught by any apostle. (Ro. 3:8; 2 Th. 2:2; Jn. 21:23)

Now, while there could be more texts, at least these teach that the Apostles expected their revelations to be received as normative for the Church, as sound doctrine, as the last word from God. And, while no clearcut statement of Scripture indicates the date "when the perfect comes" to take the place of "prophecy (which) will pass away; tongues (which) will cease; (miraculous?) knowledge (which) will pass away" (1 Co. 13:8f), nevertheless, nothing is ever to be received uncritically as from God. Rather, everything is to be judged and only what is decidedly from God is to be loved, practiced and taught. (Cf. 1 Jn. 4:1; 1 Th. 5:19-22; 1 Ti. 4:1; Rev. 2:2; 2 Th. 2:2)

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It just may be that God gave no date for the cessation of genuine prophecy, in order to be able to test every believer's faithfulness to that message "once for all committed to the saints." (Study Dt. 13:1-5.)

The key issue is, then, not "tradition versus tradition," i.e. ours against yours, because we all have traditions. Rather, the issue is good traditions as against bad ones, an issue that can be decided by seeking to know the ORIGIN of the traditions: "Are they of God, or are they of men?" (Study Mt. 21:23-27, esp. v. 25.)

But the attitude of the traditionalist effectively blocks any serious examination of his own intricately entangled beliefs and practice, because any admission that he really needs to rethink anything becomes a menace to his own psychological security based upon his belief system. But God intended that man's real certainty be based upon the very elements mentioned above that distinguish God's Word from every other! This is why the traditionalist deserves to be damned: he depends for his salvation upon his own unexamined belief system, rather than trust and utilize God's tools to correct his belief system so that he may have only divine truth to fill and transform his soul and save him for eternity!

But what of the traditionalist that is not merely indifferent and lazy, but sincere and conscientious, who wants to obey every detail of God's Law in order to please Him? If we would avoid becoming Pharisees, . . .

## II. WE MUST ALSO BEWARE OF THE THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF TRADITIONALISM.

Do traditionalists also have identifiable theological presuppositions? While there may be other factors that make a traditionalist what he is, for our purposes here, the key issue is this: what are the arguments behind the formation of traditions, arguments which urge the teaching and practice of the traditions once formed? Here are some:

1. Obedience to God means precise, conscientious and faithful performance of His Law. This good principle, however, is interpreted by the traditionalist in the sense that only punctilious of minutiae can satisfy the demands of God and is the only service pleasing to God.

2. Traditionalism must presume that God's will, as He left it for men in the Bible, is deficient, because it does not inform men about every detail he must know in order to be sure that he has observed God's Law in every detail.
3. Since obedience totally based upon law is not perfectly possible where God has not legislated every detail whereby the godly may know when they have faithfully, conscientiously and precisely fulfilled His Law, it becomes the supposedly essential function of pious scholars to formulate the missing details in order to supply the supposed deficiency in God's Law. The spectacle of a supposedly imperfect Law from a perfect God is an embarrassment which, according to the traditionalists, can be corrected only by supplying the missing details through the use of the best logic of which the sanctified human mind is capable.
  - a. This presumes, of course, that one man or any group of men is both capable and qualified to perfect the deficiency by using fallible human reason.
  - b. Those who sense the fallacy of their following human conclusions reached in this fashion yield to the temptation to attribute divine authority to the conclusions, even though the scholars themselves lack the aforementioned prophetic credentials absolutely essential to stamp their words as divine.
4. Next, the traditionalist presumes that the final result of this pious and scholarly "closing of the loop-holes" in God's Law can yet please God, bless mankind and still do so without adding any negative side effects, like, for example, breaking God's Word to keep these human rules. The essential reason for the existence of these traditions is the attempt to fill the empty spaces, the silence, the loop-holes in the Law of God, notwithstanding such warnings as Dt. 4:2; 12:32; *Prov. 30:5*, 6; *Rev. 22:18f* and similar.
5. Finally, when once the missing details are furnished in this fashion, they take on the force of divine law. Their observance has the force of obedience to God; their neglect means unfaithfulness to God. Otherwise, why bother?

The great, damning assumption behind all this kind of thinking is its fundamental criticism of God: "He did not tell us all that we believe we need to know—or desire to know—in order to do His will." There is also that presumption that sighs: "So we have to supply God's deficiencies!"

To measure just how real all this is, just think of the challenge



thrown down at Jesus by the Pharisees: *Why transgress the traditions of the elders?* Implied in this challenge are the following offensive propositions, all of which express the essential diversity between traditionalism and the religion of Jesus Christ:

1. There is a body of doctrines which is officially described as *of the elders*, of the Jewish Magisterium ("Teaching Authority"), but the question means: "Why transgress the doctrine of God as this is interpreted and taught by the elders?"
2. Whereas this doctrinal corpus is without authentic prophetic credentials and so is of human origin, it is nevertheless elevated to the level of divine revelation, a fact made clear by the nature of the test question itself, as well as by the motives of the examiners who so formulate it. It may even be exalted above it, as illustrated in the following quotations from the Palestinian Talmud (*Ber. i. 4* in Bowker, *op. cit.*, 154):

The words of the scribes are related to the words of Torah [the Law of Moses] and are to be loved like the words of Torah. . . . The words of Torah include both prohibitions and permissions; they include commands both of light and weighty importance, but the words of the scribes are all weighty. This can be known from the saying, "He who says that there should be no *tephillin* [phylacteries], thereby contradicting Torah, is without guilt, but [he who says] there should be five compartments thereby adding to the words of the scribes is guilty." . . . The words of the elders are weightier than the words of the prophets. .

3. To violate, ignore or otherwise transgress the traditions of the elders is equal to a violation of God's Word. (Some extremists held that violation of the tradition was actually far more culpable than transgression of God's Word. *San. xi. 3; Ber. i. 4*)

The blindness of the traditionalists' philosophy lies in their inability seriously to question the rightness of these propositions.

In all fairness to the "elders" themselves whose traditions are so blindly followed and passed on by their disciples, we may well ask: "Did these 'fathers,' who are cited as originators and/or bearers of the sacred tradition, or who are cited as illustrations of the 'teaching authority' at work, did they consider themselves to be **PROPHETS** with the necessary credentials in order?"

1. If they actually considered themselves as prophets, where is the

historical documentation of their credentials?

2. If they did not consider themselves prophets, by what criteria should their disciples attribute them such authority? If a given Jewish Rabbi or a given Church Father knew himself to be un-inspired by the Holy Spirit with that special inspiration whereby God speaks to men by the prophets, by what right do later generations attribute it to him?

The "Fathers' " written opinions and interpretations of Scripture do contribute to the growth of tradition, but they are not therefore any more inspired or more divine than other men, despite all the wishful thinking of their disciples.

So, since we must beware of the "traditionalist mentality" and avoid the theological presuppositions of traditionalism, what is our salvation? What will keep us from becoming Pharisees?

### III. WE MUST CONSTANTLY COMPARE OUR BELIEFS WITH THE LAW OF CHRIST AND PRACTICE IT ONLY.

Before rejecting this truism as an oversimplification of the problem; let us at least examine it. The great issue before every conscientious soul is what to do with the "loop-holes in God's Law," or, to put it another way, how to deal with God's silence. That God has not spoken on many subjects is no surprise to anyone who has read the Bible.

In fact, most Christians are fairly familiar with God's revealed will when it comes to obeying the specific commands and the well-known prohibitions in His Word. But how should we go about solving the billion and one problems about which He has chosen not to speak in the Bible?

1. Should a Christian take any part in military service?
2. What precise definitions will establish a distinctively Christian style of dress, length of hair, etc.?
3. Should a Christian dance in any form of dance, anywhere?
4. What about birth control?
5. What should be our approach toward extracongregational ecclesiastical organizations?
6. To what extent is mourning for our dead a Christian expression and at what point does it become pagan?
7. Is it possible for a Christian to please God and smoke?

This list is but a beginning, but it indicates areas of discussion where

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God has chosen not to reveal His specific will on these and many other specific subjects.

At this point we ask, "But doesn't God's Word cover EVERY phase of our lives? Isn't the Bible complete? Couldn't God foresee these problems and resolve them for us in His Word? How do we deal with them?" Others are tempted to answer, "Just pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in such matters," without realizing that the Law of Christ we are about to study IS THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT for just such decisions as we must make.

### A. HOW IS THE LAW OF CHRIST EXPRESSED?

1. It is expressed generally in the word LOVE (Mt. 22:34-40; Ro. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13f)
2. It is expressed in some detail in the form of:
  - a. Clear, positive commands, exhortations, good examples and lists of virtues to imitate;
  - b. Express prohibitions, exemplar punishments, long lists of sins to eliminate;
  - c. Rules that govern our Christian liberty to act on questions not specifically treated in the other revelations of Scripture, i.e. in the areas where God has chosen to be silent.
    - (1) *Necessity*. These rules are needed in order to eliminate the need for a gigantic library of canon law that deals with every single case of every single individual ever to live on earth.
    - (2) *Nature*. These rules are a collection of directives to help us arrive at a suitable conclusion about matters that God has not discussed in His Word. However, THESE DIRECTIVES ARE HIS WORD intended to cover such cases, therefore we may not treat these rules with indifference nor ignore them as somehow unessential. They are the revelations of the Spirit purposely made to "close up the loop-holes."
    - (3) *Purpose*. God wants to leave Christians *genuinely free to decide and act responsibly*. So He liberates us from slavery to a detailed system that would compromise our freedom by dictating our everyday decisions. Again, He frees us from that slavish attention to legal detail that exalted law as a principle of self-justification. Finally, any law can command and prohibit many things, but no law yet written can describe in sufficient detail all the possible

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positive deeds and attitudes by which the man of God should react rightly in response to his God and his neighbor.

- (4) Here are some of these directives: 1 Co. 6:12—11:1; Ro. 14:1—15:7; Gal. 5:1-25. From these texts we derive the following:

### B. THE PRINCIPLES OF CONTROL BY WHICH WE DECIDE about matters God has not decided for us, i.e. THE DIRECTIVES THAT GOVERN CHRISTIAN LIBERTY:

1. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY STATED: "All things are lawful for me" (1 Co. 6:12; 10:23), except what God has ordered or prohibited, because our freedom can never be an excuse to disobey Him. Beyond what He has expressly forbidden or commanded, "nothing is unclean of itself" (Ro. 14:14, 20). "To the pure all things are pure" (Tit. 1:15), because "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Ti. 4:4f; 1 Co. 10:26; Mk. 7:19) So, we are really free to decide about such matters.
2. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY DIRECTED by the following principles:
  - a. *Pragmatic utility*: "Not all things are helpful," BUT SOME ARE. (1 Co. 6:12) If the thing under discussion fails to do the job for which it is intended, why use it?
  - b. *Enslavement*: "I will not be enslaved by anything." (1 Co. 6:12) We are morally obligated to acknowledge no other lordship than that of the Lord Jesus. (Consider the enslavement to habits that rob us of our spontaneity, intimacy and awareness of others. Think of enslavement to drugs, or worse, to unexamined ideas!)
  - c. *Honesty in the application of these rules*: "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." (Gal. 5:13) "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." (1 Pt. 2:16) Shun immorality, idols, etc. (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; Ro. 3:8) No dishonest use of these rules can ever justify sin.
  - d. *Effect on others*: "Cause no stumbling" (Mt. 18:1-14; 1 Co. 8; 10:31—11:1)
  - e. *The right to dispense with our rights*: Any undeniable right may be dispensed with for sake of our neighbor, particularly

- where the use of that right scandalizes a brother for whom Christ died. (Ro. 14:13-16; 1 Co. 9:12, 15, 18-23; 6:7)
- f. *Edification of others* is a positive good that should be sought in every decision: "Let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding." (Ro. 14:19; 15:2) "Not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." (1 Co. 10:23f) "I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." (1 Co. 10:33; cf. 1 Co. 8:1; Ro. 15:1f)
  - g. *Recognize the liberty of others to decide for themselves before God.* All decisions are strictly personal, not universal: "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. . . . The conviction that you have keep between yourself and God." (Ro. 14:5b, 22)
  - h. *All decisions must reflect the true nature of the Kingdom of God* which does not consist in "food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17f)
  - i. *Always decide a question leaning to the side of mercy.* (Mt. 5:7; 6:9, 12f; 9:13; 12:7; 18:15-35; Jas. 2:12f; 3:17)
  - j. *Do everything "for the Lord"* (Ro. 14:6-9), "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), "as serving the Lord and not men" (Col. 3:22-24; Eph. 5:22, 25; 6:1, 5-9), "to the glory of God." (1 Co. 10:31)
  - k. *Accept as a brother in Christ everyone who is genuinely in Christ*, regardless of those differences of opinion that distinguish you. (Ro. 14:1; 15:7)
  - l. The last rule is that there may be more rules! There may be more directives in God's Word that should go on this list. These listed, however, are typical, but they are mandatory and not opinionable nor optional. They are God's revelations about how to deal with subjects about which He has chosen not to make His specific will known in each and every case.

It becomes increasingly clear, then, that decisions made on this kind of basis are going to vary from person to person, from congregation to congregation, and from century to century. According to this view, therefore, God has built into His system some directives that actually permit differences of opinion. This, then, is one area where complete uniformity is decidedly impossible. And God wants it that way! This is the reason behind the excellent motto:

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"In essentials, UNITY. In non-essentials, LIBERTY. In all things, CHARITY."

We must be perfectly united in the essentials, proclaiming with one voice what God has expressly commanded or forbidden, as well as the above-listed rules which direct our free decisions as we express our Christian liberty. However, nothing God has omitted from His revelations can be considered essential, so in these very non-essentials we are truly free to exercise our liberty and grant the same freedom to others. But in our obedience to the essentials, as well as in our decisions about the non-essentials, the fundamental principle is always love.

To put it another way: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak. Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." This means that, when the Scriptures order or prohibit something, we must require only that which the Scriptures authorize, because these are the essentials. If the Scriptures require nothing for a given case, we may impose nothing either.

This same principle can be applied to the non-essentials by expressing it inversely: "Where the Scriptures speak, we must be silent and give our whole-souled obedience without complaint or objection. Where the Scriptures are silent, only then may we speak our opinion, for God has left us free to decide and act responsibly."

Since these rules require that we think and act responsibly, some Christians in their immaturity are bound to reject them and never make use of them, choosing rather to let others do their thinking and deciding for them, or else continue in their traditional habits, indifferent to new truth and changing conditions, insensitive to people and, most tragically of all, insensitive to the normative revelation of the Word of God.

But our God has chosen to set us free from bondage to men and slavery to detailed systems, so that we might act in character as His sons. So, for those who love Jesus and are willing to submit to His will, even that part of His will where He would push them out of the nest to try their wings and learn to fly in the boundless liberty of the sons of God, their course is clear! And there is not a Pharisee among them.

Section 37

JESUS HEALS A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S  
DEMONIZED DAUGHTER

(Parallel: Mark 7:24-30)

TEXT: 15:21-28

21 And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out from those borders, and cried, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.

27 But she said, Yea, Lord: for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was healed from that hour.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. It would appear that a person, who desired to be known by as many of the world's people as possible, would go where the most people are, especially those who would be prepared to grasp his message. (See Jn. 7:3f.) But here Jesus deliberately leaves Palestine for Phoenicia seeking PRIVACY. (Mk. 7:24) How do you account for this apparent inconsistency in Jesus' conduct?
- b. Though Jesus sought privacy, "He could not be hid." How do you explain this?
- c. Mark says that the Syrophoenician woman "heard of Him." How would she have heard about Jesus?
- d. Why do you suppose this Gentile woman addressed Jesus by that strictly Jewish title: "Son of David"? What could she possibly understand by the use of such a title?

- e. Is it not courteous to reply when spoken to? Yet Jesus did not answer her one word. How do you account for such conduct?
- f. Can you explain how Jesus could be so anxious to speak to the Samaritan woman but was so reluctant to take time for the Syro-phenician?
- g. How do you account for the disciples' insistence that Jesus "send her away"? Had not Jesus helped Gentiles before? Had they themselves not learned to show merciful helpfulness to those in need? What could have motivated these closest followers of Jesus to talk this way?
- h. After Jesus explained to the woman His basic mission to earth, why then did she not leave? Was there something in His manner that indicated to her that, when He said "no," He really meant "yes"?
- i. By implication of Jesus' figure of speech, He was calling the woman a dog. Do you think this was right? Is not this kind of treatment cruel? Do you think it right to tax this poor woman's feelings this way?
- j. Why is Jesus so overjoyed at the greatness of this woman's faith? What is so unusual about her faith that makes it great in Jesus' judgment?
- k. Although no text specifically describes the activity of Jesus and His Apostles during this journey outside of Palestine, after considering not only the events that immediately preceded the trip as well as the critical moments in the larger context, would you suggest what Jesus and His men might possibly have done while gone from Palestine? What specific needs could this trip have met, that, until the journey was made, could not have been satisfied?
- l. After explaining to the woman His basic mission to earth, which limited Him to the Jews, why then did Jesus go ahead and cast the demon out of this Gentile woman's daughter? What would you think if Jesus had absolutely refused? What would the Apostles or the woman have thought?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus and His disciples went away from the area around Capernaum and withdrew completely out of Galilee to the foreign district of Phoenicia around Tyre and Sidon. There He entered into a house because He would have liked to remain incognito. But to remain



hidden proved impossible, for a Canaanite woman from that region, whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean demon, heard about Him. Now the woman was a Greek, or pagan, and Syro-phoenician by birth. Right away she approached Him, calling out, "Have pity on me, Lord, David's Son: my daughter is severely tormented by an unclean demon!"

But Jesus gave her no reply—not one word.

So His followers crowded around Him urging, "Do send her away, Lord, because she is continuing to follow us shouting."

Jesus objected, "But I was sent to help the Jews, not the Gentiles."

But the woman came around in front of Jesus, fell to her knees at His feet, begging Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. She pleaded, "Help me, Lord!"

To this Jesus answered, "Let the children first be fed! It is not right, you know, to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies."

"Yes, Lord, however, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's scraps that fall from their masters' table."

"Lady, you've got a lot of faith! For an answer like that, what you desired shall be done for you! You may go home content, because the demon has already left your daughter."

Thus was her daughter healed instantly. Her mother went home and found her child lying quietly in bed, the demon gone.

## SUMMARY

Travelling incognito in Phoenicia, Jesus and His Apostles encountered a mother whose daughter was demonized. Jesus preferred anonymity, but the woman recognized Him and immediately sought His supernatural aid in behalf of her daughter. Jesus parried her pleas with the objection that the purpose of His ministry was primarily in behalf of the Jewish people, even though this Gentile woman had called Him the Christ. She insisted. He seems to object again, but leaves the door open to further appeal, since He neither sent her away nor flatly refused to help. She seized upon a part of a figure of speech He had used, turning it to her credit. Admiring her motherly determination and indomitable confidence in His ability, Jesus granted her request. Instantly the demon departed from the daughter, leaving her in peace, resting in bed.

## NOTES

## WHAT IS MATTHEW UP TO NOW?

No Bible student may forget that each of the Gospel writers is independent of the others, even though much of what he includes shares striking verbal similarities with that recorded by the others. This fact raises the question concerning the purpose for each author's including this or that fact, as well as the significance of certain unusual omissions or inclusions. Even as the Apostolic Epistles were written to deal with needs in the early Church, the Evangelists intend to present a picture of the Lord Jesus that will not only be adequate for all time, but will meet needs in their own century. This is why only the Holy Spirit can be the editor-in-chief of these materials, because only He is sufficiently far-sighted to know what will accomplish these two divergent purposes.

Now, while it is certainly true that the Hebrew Christians and those yet unconverted Jews of the first century would need to grasp the universality of the Christian Gospel, is it necessary or even possible to see in each single difference between the two narratives we have of this event, some key to the individual emphasis of Matthew or Mark? For example:

1. Is the fact significant that Matthew, not Mark, records Jesus' affirmation: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"? (15:24)
2. Is it important that Matthew does not say, with Mark: "Let the children (Jews) first be fed"? After all, if Matthew's point is to teach precisely this conclusion that the Gospel is for the Jews first and then for the Gentile, how could he have omitted it? Or, did he, as a wise master teacher, prefer to suggest the conclusion without stating it? (See notes before 8:18: "What Is This Text Doing Here?")
3. Is it true that Matthew's quotation: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," while also quoted by Mark, since it stands alone in Matthew's context with Jesus' earlier statement of His Jewish mission (v. 24), leads to the conclusion that the pagans have no right to help whatever? If so, upon first reading, such a view would have been acceptable to the Jewish reader. Nevertheless, the whole impact of Matthew's entire section is the moral impossibility of being deaf to their cry.

4. Matthew, not Mark, cites Jesus' praise of this Gentile woman's faith (v. 28), whereas Mark emphasizes the brilliance of her trusting response with no special mention of her faith.
5. Of less importance is Matthew's omission to mention that Jesus entered a house in a heathen land (cf. Ac. 10:28; 11:3), because not even Mark who mentions it affirms that it was a pagan's house, since it could have been one belonging to a Jew living in Phoenicia.
6. Whereas Mark, using normal Jewish parlance, describes the woman as a "Greek," which would mean "gentile" to anyone even distantly familiar with the paganizing influences of Hellenism in Israel and would remind the orthodox of the nationalistic struggles of the Maccabean period, yet it is Matthew that calls the woman a "Canaanite," a word almost impossible to overload with connotations: "pagan, ignorant, godless, superstitious, damned Gentile."

Whatever the details, that Matthew should have seized upon this one incident to illustrate Jesus' trip abroad, merits attention because of His meaningful encounter with this non-Hebrew. Because of the apparently casual nature of this meeting, it would be risky to affirm that He was laying the foundation for later evangelization among the Gentiles. His personal intention is another. (See Mk. 7:24.) However, Matthew's inclusion of this incident, because of the evident trust of this woman in the Hebrew Messiah, would undoubtedly argue the rightness of including also others of "like precious faith" in God's Kingdom, even though they be of heathen background.

This is evidence for seeing the proper place of this narrative in the general Matthaean apologetic for the place of Gentiles in the New Israel. Whereas Jesus intended to initiate no personal mission to the Gentiles, as He Himself indicates in the text, still His reactions demonstrated toward them an openness that taught Matthew to open his heart to them too. Now, the cosmopolitan outlook of this Apostle gently nudges his "kinsmen according to the flesh" to reconsider their understanding of the Messiah. Though this entire period spent by the Lord outside of Palestine probably offered excellent opportunities to give the most concentrated attention and teaching He was ever able to provide His Apostles in private, nevertheless, Matthew leaves that possibility entirely out of the picture. Rather, he deliberately records for his readers just this one incident,—and the lady and her daughter are CANAANITES! This fact might sail over the heads of Gentile readers, but it could hardly do less than stun

a Hebrew leaving him wide-eyed with wonder in the presence of a universal Messiah. (See on 15:22.) A Gentile Christian might impatiently ask, "Couldn't Matthew have played down her unsavory past and gotten on with the Gospel?" Matthew seems to answer: "But this is Gospel! When the Messiah of Israel blesses a Canaanite, this is the most glorious news I can think of! When the Servant of Jehovah becomes the servant of the servant of servants, what glorious grace and mercy must be available to men!" (Study Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15.)

Another direct connection Matthew may intend is that between the preceding discussion with the Pharisees about ritual purity and (by implication) clean and unclean foods, and this section that deals with unclean and defiling people. This same approach is used by God in teaching the Jewish Peter to admit Gentiles into the Kingdom. He does this by first demanding that the Apostle eat unclean food and then sends him to unclean people. (To appreciate this relationship, study the [to us] odd connections between Peter's vision and the conclusions he drew from it. Acts 10:14f, 28, 34f) This, then, is the type of argument that Matthew's Jewish readers could best appreciate and arrive at the right conclusion: if ritual purity is not the main issue, and if the heart purity is the essential, it may be true, then, that even Gentiles, who know nothing of Levitical ceremonies, but who have genuinely pure hearts and trust the God of Israel, may be considered clean and candidates for membership in the New Israel too.

Beyond Matthew's personal purpose for including this section, we should also enjoy the psychological study this narrative provides for examining the interplay of personality as Jesus deals with this woman, and as she deals with Jesus. Stay alert, because He MAY deal with us in just this same way!

#### SITUATION: JESUS DESIRES PRIVACY (15:21; Mk. 7:24)

**15:21 And Jesus went out thence, and withdrew.** (*exelthòn ekeîthen ho Iesoûs anechôresen*) Reasons for this strategic journey must be decided in the light of His larger situation. (Mt. 13-17. See notes on 14:1, 13, where Jesus' problem and plan are more fully discussed.)

1. His primary reason: "And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and would

not have anyone know. Yet he could not be hid." (Mk. 7:24) From this it is concluded that He desired privacy, not merely from the Jews whose land He had left, but even from the Gentiles in whose country He now sojourned. Out of this grow the following surmises:

2. The entire band needed relaxation from the strenuous activities of the preceding weeks: the evangelization of Galilee, the feeding of the five thousand, the emotional strain after the murder of John the Baptist, the concern about Herod Antipas' undesirable curiosity about Jesus, the pressure of the Pharisees' attacks, the unbelief of the people.
3. The Twelve needed opportunity to evaluate their own evangelistic attempts concluded just before the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Before this there had been no significant time for that.
4. The Twelve needed relief from the pressures of Israel's majority rejection of Jesus as Messiah, so they could more objectively weigh Israel's unbelief against the total picture of their Master's unassailable prophetic credentials.
5. Since Jesus had dealt with Tyrians and Sidonians before, even if these were Jewish residents of Phoenicia (cf. Mk. 3:7; Lk. 6:17), could He have realistically hoped to travel through that region with the Twelve and remain unrecognized? This consideration renders it difficult to exclude a half-veiled intention to show by this one incident that, while His mission was specifically to the Hebrews, nevertheless His blessing and power is eventually for the Gentiles also. Morgan (*Matthew*, 202) may be right to suggest:

Perhaps He took His disciples there that they might see the thing He had not been able to show them in the midst of His own people with their traditionalism and ritualism; that *they* might see faith working free and untrammelled; and as He took them there He revealed to them the force of faith in contrast with the barrenness of ritualism.

Could He not have foreseen that "He could not be hid" (Mk. 7:24) and forestalled any and all contact with needy pagans, had He really wanted to avoid that? If so, then His desire to remain in the background is directly related to His intention not to begin a foreign-based Gentile ministry, while any personal contacts are to be exceptional.

**Tyre and Sidon** are located roughly fifty miles south of Beirut, Lebanon. This is Jesus' second physical presence in a foreign country, occasioned now, as upon His flight to Egypt (Mt. 2), by the suspicion of a Herodian king and the lack of spirituality among God's people. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 37f) disagrees that Jesus is out of Israel, because:

1. Jesus withdrew from the Capernaum area to "the borders of Tyre and Sidon" but did not cross the border. (See Mk. 7:24.)
2. He "entered into a house" which would undoubtedly be a Jewish home. (Cf. Ac. 10:28; Mt. 8:8)
3. The Canaanitish woman "came out from those borders" to seek Jesus' help in extreme northern Galilee. (Mt. 15:22)

However, none of these arguments are conclusive because:

1. While Mark's *tà hòria* does mean "boundaries," however in our literature it is used exclusively in the plural to mean "region, district." (Arndt-Gingrich, 584f; cf. Mt. 2:16; 4:13; 8:34; 15:22, 39; 19:1; Mk. 5:17; 7:31b; 10:1; Ac. 13:50) If interpreted strictly as "borders," all these cases would prove that the events narrated occurred on the border, never within the given district. But these are not "borderline cases"! Further, Matthew's *tà mère* agrees perfectly with this understanding, since his *tà mère* refers to "the parts of a country, hence, region, district" (Arndt-Gingrich, 507; cf. Mt. 2:22; 16:13; Mk. 8:10; Ac. 2:10; 20:2)
2. Who, in the light of the vastness of the Dispersion, can prove there were no Jewish homes outside of Palestine? (Ac. 2:5-11; 14:21) On the other hand, to avoid the need for Gentile hospitality, could not Jesus have hired a house for His stay? Were there no funds at His disposal? (Cf. Lk. 8:3 and notes on 14:16)
3. The Greek word order of Mt. 15:22 may well represent a quite different nuance captured by the RSV: "A Canaanite woman from that region came out." "Came out" refers, not to her departure from Phoenicia, but from her own home in that area in which Jesus now finds Himself.
4. Mark (7:31) is conclusive geographic evidence that Jesus is definitely out of Israel, because Jesus "returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon" (*élthen dià Sidônos*), hence traveled even further north from Tyre before turning back eastward and south toward the Decapolis. (See on 15:29.)

## I. THE REQUEST BY FAITH (15:22)

15:22 **And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out.** Sidon is one of the most ancient Canaanite cities in the world. (Gen. 10:15-19) Compare the history of Elijah in this same territory during a period of great Jewish unbelief where he too found great faith in another Syrophoenician woman (1 Kg. 17). That well-known event in Hebrew history should mitigate the surprise of pious Hebrews who would be tempted to be offended by the Messiah's travels and sharing God's gracious power beyond the physical limits of Israel. (Lk. 4:24-26)

## A. Her request came out of the depth of her distress:

1. The failure of her pagan religion to meet the crisis of her demonized daughter only exacerbated her disgust for its empty, powerless idolatry. Her pagan faith had sufficed until that dark day when only **REAL** power could answer her need. The presence of the demonic in the little Gentile girl provides further evidence of the objective reality of demons, because not limited by nation, age or sex of their victims.
2. Her own vicarious suffering was great in proportion to the love she felt for her child. (Cf. Mark's picturesque *thugàtrion*: "little daughter.")
3. She had to come alone, unable even to bring her afflicted child before Jesus so as better to be able to plead the depth of her need by showing Him the distressed girl personally.

## B. Her request came despite the distinct disadvantages of her position:

1. She is a woman. Could she have known about Jewish prejudices that frowned upon a woman's talking with a rabbi, or the reluctance of a common rabbi to be addressed by a woman? (Cf. Jn. 4:7-9, 27) Still, she approached **THIS** Rabbi, confident that He is potentially so much more than the run-of-the-mill Jewish teacher, calling Him "Lord, Son of David."
2. She, a Gentile, came to this Jew:
  - a. She was Greek by culture and language, but to Hebrews, mindful of the earlier Maccabean struggles against the paganizing tendencies of Hellenism, "Greek" means "pagan." (Cf. Ro. 1:13-16; 2:9f; 1 Co. 1:22-24)
  - b. She was Syrophoenician because of the geographical position of her home. Syro-phoenicia means that part of Phoenician domain that lies west of Syria and is connected with it, as opposed to Phoenician colonies of Lybia, or Libophoenicia.)

- c. She was a Canaanite by ancestry, and perhaps also by religion. This fact inserted into a Jewish Gospel rings alarm bells everywhere, because she is a remnant of the accursed race of Baal-worshippers with which Israel was to have absolutely NO DEALINGS. (Gen. 9:25-27; 10:6, 15; Ex. 23:23-33; 34:11-16; Dt. 7:1-5, 16; 20:16-18)
- 3. Her right to petition Jesus was very much in doubt and only negatively admitted:
  - a. He did not answer her (15:23), but no answer is better than no.
  - b. He did not send her away as urged by the disciples. (15:23)
  - c. He did not admit her prior privilege to receive His help, but having said that others came first, He did not deny she came second. (Mk. 7:27)
- C. Her request is based upon some knowledge of Jesus, however meager.
  - 1. Whereas Jesus' intention was to gain privacy, someone recognized Him anyway. To imagine that some residents of Phoenicia had been present to hear the Sermon on the Mount and go home amazed to tell about it and Him is not difficult. (Cf. Lk. 6:17; Mk. 3:7) However much we would wish it otherwise, this incident provides no firm basis for believing in a widespread Gentile expectation of a Jewish Messiah, that is, an expectation totally unconnected with Jewish expectations based on prophecy. Mark (7:25) says she "having heard about Him . . . came," without stating how or from whom she learned it. It is more likely that some Jewish neighbor living in her Phoenician town told her what they had learned on their festal trips to Israel. (Cf. 2 Kg. 5:2-4)
  - 2. The address with which she presented her case to Jesus is not the sort of appellative to be expected in the mouth of a totally ignorant, superstitious pagan. Just how much understanding does it reveal she had? This would probably depend upon the testimony of those (Jewish?) fellow-citizens who informed her about Jesus: did they use this title with all the understanding we expect of spiritual Jews, hence, did they communicate to her something of Jesus' great mission?
    - a. Lenski (*Matthew*, 594) suggests that "when the woman combines 'Lord' with 'son of David,' she understands 'Lord' in the higher sense as being in fact the Messianic title . . ." (But see on 15:25.)



- b. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 39) believes that she could not have had full spiritual understanding of the world-wide bearing of the Davidic promises, or of the world-embracing designation of the Messiah as the Son of David. Hence, **Son of David** may have been for her but a popular, political title that certainly elevated Jesus to earthly power and glory as a supremely powerful man, but, because it was devoid of the rich content such a title must express to be used rightfully, it treated Him as a political, Jewish superman. However, Jesus helped others who had not all that understanding. (Mt. 9:27; 12:23; 20:30f)
- c. Unfortunately for her, to call Him all that this title implies can never make her a member of the covenant people. If He is really **Son of David**, the Messiah of Israel, then she can claim no rights inherent in her use of that title, because she is not Hebrew. Mere use of glorious, complimentary titles as such can never guarantee her participation in the covenantal relationship to Abraham—i.e. unless, by an expression of great faith, she prove that she possesses that dependence upon Jesus that would constitute her a true daughter of Abraham by faith. (Cf. Ro. 4:11, 16) If so, then she would be amply qualified to receive anything destined for those who hail Him **Lord, Son of David**. But until this latter truth is fully evident, by the terms of His own mandate and because of the confusion He would cause by appearing to reverse His position taken in Israel against uninformed appeal to His messianic powers without appreciation of His true messianic identity and Lordship, He cannot grant her request.

## II. THE RELENTLESSNESS OF FAITH (15:23-27; Mk. 7:27f)

15:23 **But he answered her not a word** is totally contradictory to what we would have expected from a tender, compassionate Savior, who, without compromise to His Jewish mission could have symbolically pictured the future universality of His Kingdom by responding positively and instantly to her request. In fact, would not His positive response to this appeal for help from Israel's Messiah be the better type of that future expansion into all the world? This very feature that, at first, disappoints our expectation is another evidence that our story is not the sort of thing Christian sentiment would have

dreamed up. Rather, it demonstrates that in our hands is no dubious tradition or Christian myth, but authentic history. Its authenticity, in turn, invites us to dig deeper to discover whether our disappointment be groundless or not.

**He answered her not a word.** Some object to the explanation of Jesus' attitude as intended to test the woman, because incompatible with His divine purity and rectitude, especially should she, in her weaknesses, have failed the test. But this underevaluates Jesus by supposing that He would not have mercifully come to her rescue, as He did in the case of Jairus (Mk. 5:35f; Lk. 8:49f) or that of Peter (Mt. 14:30f) or that of the nine Apostles (Mt. 17:16ff). Is it more credible that Jesus should not have helped even this smoldering wick of faith, however ignorant or unqualified? (Cf. Mt. 12:20) And, for the perfection of her understanding and faith, who can say that Jesus cannot use precisely a method that seems an unspeakably cruel trial, but, because He knows how far He can test, proves to be precisely the best means of teaching her what she must learn and leading her to greater heights of faith?

It is a wrong view of God that supposes that He cannot, or does not, try us by delaying answers to prayer or by acting in some way that appears to us to be His willing affliction or His disguising His loving purposes for us, in order to produce some effect in us. It is also a limited understanding about God that fails to appreciate His love to be wrestled with by His people. (Cf. Abraham, Gen. 18:16-33; Jacob, Gen. 32:22-30; Moses, Nu. 14:11-20; Ex. 32:9-14, 31-35)

A. Her **RESOLUTION** remained undaunted by Jesus' seeming indifference and her apparent temporary failure.

1. Unsatisfied to cry to Him from afar once or twice, she continued to appeal.

a. The perplexed disciples, aware of Jesus' purpose for this journey and His desire for anonymity, probably worry about the woman's continual shouting, since her calling attention to the presence of the *Son of David* in this area could easily compromise everything Jesus intended to accomplish toward the training of the Twelve. Ironically, however, part of their discipline must consist in the lesson that showing compassion upon a needy person who is a nuisance just to get rid of them is not Christian compassion. Nevertheless, His silence is so unlike Jesus that the Twelve immediately notice it and are

openly embarrassed by it.

- b. The disciples' solution is to urge the Lord to send her away. Even though they counsel the Lord to end her persistent, nerve-racking pleading, their advice is not entirely heartless, because the men probably remember that Jesus had helped Gentiles before. (Mt. 8:7ff) So it would not be wholly unreasonable to expect Him to be merciful to this foreign woman too. If so, not totally unsympathetic to her cries, they excitedly advise the Master to get it over with, cast out the demon and send her on her way. Their intercession, even in this negative way, encourages her to hope.
  - c. His seeming discouragement served only to intensify the warmth of her pleading (15:25). How long did she follow this group of thirteen men down the road, attracting attention to herself as she cried after Him? Her determination is being tested to the limit by these circumstances.
2. This quick-witted mother noticed that Jesus, in ignoring the Apostles' complaint, offers her a glimmer of hope. If she dare not hope that "silence gives consent," at least His silence was not a cold nor final refusal. It may also be that His own unruffled manner, despite His seeming stand-off attitude, and the total absence of any evidence of displeasure at her insistence, communicated more to her than His reported words tell us.
  3. Jesus demands simply that all embrace the divine plan for His personal mission. (Cf. Ro. 15:8f)

**15:24 But he answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This answer is addressed primarily to the Twelve who urge Him to send her away. On the assumption that they counsel Him to grant her request so as to hurry her away, Jesus is seen as explaining to them why He should not grant it without clearing up the essential issue involved. If their advice be based upon Jesus' miraculous help and limited sharing of His truth with Gentiles and Samaritans prior to this event (as e.g. Mt. 8:5ff; Jn. 4:7ff, 42), in those cases, however, His Jewish mandate had not been in doubt, probably because He was then within the physical borders of Israel. Here, on the other hand, He is in Gentile country.

**I was . . . sent . . . unto the lost . . . of Israel.** This is the definite principle and the proper method guiding His ministry, divinely determined for the purpose of bringing it to a successful and right conclusion. This is why it is not easy to ignore it. Yet it could be

departed from, if the reason were valid to justify it. It was not an inviolable law admitting of no exceptions. Nevertheless, because of its fundamental character, it could not be ignored, except for unusual circumstances. Whether or not this situation qualifies as exceptional, had not yet been demonstrated.

**I was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** This is true in two senses:

1. My personal mission is only to the Jews in the sense that I will live, work and die among them only. My followers will evangelize the Gentiles too, but the peculiar demands of my mission limit my work to the Jews, in order to guarantee salvation to all. For this reason I cannot labor extensively among Samaritans or Gentiles until my mission to Israel will have been fully executed. This is the tactic of limited objectives. Time is too precious to permit me to neglect the very people whom God has been preparing for centuries for just this moment when I may win and train Hebrew disciples to become missionaries to the entire world. (Indications of His sense of world mission are: Jn. 10:16-18; cf. 11:52; 12:32; 17:20f.) Further, any extensive ministry among pagans could so alienate my precious Hebrew following that all past teaching would be lost. (Study the continuing racial problems in the life of the early Church to appreciate Jesus' practical dilemma here.) Some fail to see that Jesus' motive for refusal to enlarge His ministry to include Gentiles would have prevented His acceptability as Messiah to the Jews, since, they say, His nation had already rejected Him. But this objection overlooks the prejudices and limited understanding of those genuine disciples who had truly accepted Him, but still could not accept the evangelization of Gentiles. (Cf. Peter in Ac. 10; 11:15; Gal. 2)
2. Figuratively: only those who are willing to become *lost sheep of the house of Israel*, can come under the terms of my mission. That is, if you really understand that the Davidic reign and the promises include Gentiles too, if you confess your lostness without the grace of the God of Abraham, and if you admit your trust in anything He reveals, then you can enjoy the right to call me "Son of David" in its fullest sense and reap the benefits of your confession. In fact, you, too, will have thus become a true child of Abraham by faith. This explanation, however, stretches the literal use of the phrase which definitely limited the evangelistic outreach of the Apostles when Jesus sent them to preach just a few weeks earlier.

(Mt. 10:5f) Hence, to have expected any Gentile to understand this extended sense is asking too much comprehension on their part.

While Jesus' answer is primarily directed to the Twelve, it is for her ears too, because she must probe her own understanding of the situation: "You call me *Son of David*? Then you admit that I am the Messiah of Israel. Since you are not a Jewess, how can I help you?" Jesus insists that the woman recognize the sacred distinction between God's chosen people and all others. This is not racism, but reality, since it helps her to recognize that "salvation is of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). In fact God had already spent two thousand years to develop a system of belief, a vocabulary of faith and an understanding of God upon which men of all nations could set their hopes and by which they could recognize the incarnate Messiah when He came. It has now come to its fruition in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of ISRAEL, and men must come to Him and be united together in the New Israel, if they are to receive the blessing for which they yearn.

Is Jesus TESTING this woman at all? It is doubtful that He intended so to test her patience as to make her value His blessing, because His arguments are theologically, not psychologically, oriented. He does not doubt her objective sincerity nor argue against the rightness or depth of her motherly concern. Rather, He argues against His own subjective right to extend the terms of His own personal mission and mandate to include Gentiles. His objections are right and proper within themselves, even if He should never grant her request. It is a matter of tactics that His ministry had to be severely limited to accomplish the specific goals of His incarnation, and this meant strategic limitations of His efforts to Israel. Thus, the blessing of any Gentile, who happened to come into contact with Him, was purely incidental to His main purpose. Nevertheless, despite the primary thrust of these objections, whereby He explains to all present why He cannot consider an extensive Gentile ministry, the very act of stating these reasons produced in the Syrophoenician a secondary result: they tested her understanding and her determination to continue. In fact, since these objections do not categorically refuse her, she is left free to respond to them as she will. The sense and flow of this conversation may be outlined as follows:

- a. Lord, Son of David, help me!
- b. But my mission is to the Jews.
- c. Lord, help me!

- d. My mission is properly and primarily to the Jews.
- e. I accept your mission and see my place in it.
- f. Good, I'll help you!

Notice, therefore, that, because He graciously condescended to teach her what she must know in order rightly to call Him *Son of David*, and because He has already begun the lesson, there is more real mercy in His refusal than in the Apostles' well-meaning advice to ignore the lesson, get on with the healing and hustle her away, so terminating the embarrassing situation. They intend only to relieve a temporary aggravation to themselves. The Lord is already at work to save a soul for eternity!

Further, His tender affection for His own nation and His single-minded determination to save His people from their sins, revealed in the expression (15:24), underscores His deep Shepherd's care and concern for their lost condition. (Study Mt. 1:21; 9:36; 10:5; Cf. Lk. 19:41ff) Though these words are intended for Jewish ears and Jewish readers, they certainly cater to no nationalistic prejudices, for they imply the damnation of the Hebrew flock: they are the *lost sheep of Israel's house*. So, unless a given Hebrew says to Jesus: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for I do not forget thy commandments." (Psa. 119:176), he cannot be saved. This establishes once more the righteous condemnation of the self-righteous who have no need for Jesus! (See on 9:13.)

B. Her *RESERVE* is shown by her proper humility, despite the rightness of her request and the painful desperation of her need, should Christ refuse. 15:25 **But she came and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.**

1. She always recognized Jesus as *Lord* in all her addresses. Her own understanding of the word may well not equal what a Christian now means when he confesses "Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:10f; 1 Co. 12:3; Ro. 10:9) Nevertheless, her considerate humility requires of her that she address Him as "Sir," whether she knew all about His true authority or not. On the other hand, when she couples *Lord* with "Son of David," she may mean to acknowledge His true Lordship.
2. She did not argue with Him whether His Messiahship ought to be international or not, however biased or prejudicial His affirmation of His Jewish mandate may have sounded to her.

Rather than argue, **she came and worshipped him**. Mark (7:25) notes: "She came and fell down at his feet" (*elthou̓sa prosépesen pròs tous pòdas autoû*), as if she had been following (cf. Mt. 15:23), crying after Jesus, and now runs around ahead of the group, practically blocking their passage by kneeling before Him. She apparently just could not permit herself to entertain the opinion that He was a sectarian Savior, however rightly His mission be directed toward the Hebrew people.

3. She focused attention, not on her nation, but upon the crying need of her single human problem: "Help ME!" At this point she has dropped the Jewish title, "Son of David," as though she recognized her lack of right to use that nomenclature. Even this seemingly desperate act is not devoid of genuine faith, because where her lack of qualification is greatest, she hurls her case, her lack of qualification—herself at Jesus' feet, as if to say, "Lord, help me to qualify!" If this is not total, believing dependence upon His grace, what could be? If this is not the finest expression of Abrahamic faith that qualifies one as a child of Abraham, what could be?
4. She could focus others' attention upon her problem, because it was so much at the center of her own. This woman, as Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 136) puts it: "had the one supremely effective quality in prayer—she was in deadly earnest. Prayer for her was no ritual form; it was the outpouring of the passionate desire of her soul, which somehow felt that she could not—and must not—and need not—take no for an answer." When one knows he can turn to no other for help, he wastes no idle words in expressing his urgent need.

**15:26 And he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs.** Since the following evidences prove that Jesus knew all along what He was doing, we can stop worrying whether His methods seem right and loving or not:

1. Although He had earlier answered her not even a word (15:23), His statements proved He had been listening and understood her pleas.
2. Although He gave her no direct encouragement to continue, still He did not send her away nor concur in the Apostles' counsel.
3. Although He declared that His ministry was PRIMARILY for the Jews ("Let the children first be fed . . ." Mk. 7:27a), He did not entirely shut the door to the Gentiles.

How, therefore, should Jesus' answer be interpreted? Two views of **dogs** are common:

1. By referring to Gentiles even as animals under the table, Jesus really intends to bring out the classic Jewish-Gentile prejudices without subscribing to them Himself. That is, whereas *kunàrion* is admittedly diminutive, still puppies are animals, not people. But because He said "puppies," not "dogs," He is seen as arguing good-naturedly with her about the usual mutual contempt between the two peoples.
2. The other view sees nothing of this partisan byplay. Rather, Jesus' exquisite choice of words flashes pictures all over the screen of her mind. In fact, even though this woman's little girl may not have owned a puppy (*kunàrion*), the lady herself was certainly familiar with house-dogs hopefully wagging their tails for a tidbit (*psichìon*) "accidentally" dropped by their little masters. Thus, Jesus' words intend only to picture a situation without any reference to traditional biases. In effect, they become a germ-parable that continues to insist upon a sense of fitness or appropriateness: "Children are fed in one way and time, while the puppies are fed differently and generally later. They are not permitted to act as if they too were children, however hungry they might be for even the meagerest morsel intended for their owners. The normal order is: first, the children are fed, and then the house-dogs. (Mk. 7:27) Nor is the children's food to be taken from them and given, instead, to the house-dogs. (Mt. 15:26) Neither of these possibilities would be proper (*kalòn*)."

If Jesus had no intention of helping her at all, there is no excusing Him for leading her on, opening up so many doors to hope. Only the long-faced, dull commentators fail to see the twinkle in Jesus' eyes or miss the kindness of His voice, and so can only quarrel about the bitterness and contemptuous arrogance of the word "dog." Had Jesus really said "dog" as the common versions generally render it, then the commentaries would have some reason to mention "dogs" as a derogatory term for foreigners and others of ill-repute. Although Arndt-Gingrich (458) say that *kunàrion* can also be used with no diminutive force at all, the only mention of *kunària* in the NT is in this text, whereas all references to "dogs" in the NT are only in Mt. 7:6; Lk. 16:21; Phil. 3:2; 2 Pt. 2:22; Rev. 22:15, and the word there is always *kùon*, never *kunàrion*. Jewish-Gentile prejudices do not even enter into Jesus' meaning, because His argument is against the



impropriety of taking what has been especially prepared (bread) for a particular people (Jews) and giving it, instead, to another group (Gentiles) for whom it was not immediately intended. The whole question revolves around the planning of the Master of the house (God), who ordained that the normal procedure should follow the proper order: (1) Children (Jews); (2) House pets (Gentiles). The decision about what is "good, fair or right (*kalòn*)" is decided by the Master of the house, not by hard feelings and prejudices between those who, in this figure, turn out to be the children and the dogs. (Study Ac. 3:26; 13:26, 46.)

**"Let the children first be fed"** (Mk. 7:27a) is a theme developed in the Roman epistle by Paul, who, though fundamentally determined to expound the universality of the salvation in Christ, cannot set aside this rigorous precedence: "The Gospel is the power of God to save anyone who believes it, to the Jew first and then to the Greek." (Ro. 1:16) For eight chapters Paul presents justification by faith as quite unconnectd with any sacred pre-existing conditions such as possession of the Law or descendance from the right nation through the patriarchs, etc. Immediately thereafter, however, in chapters 9-11 even he too deals with Israel's preciousness to God in the universal plan of salvation.

Whereas Jesus had presented to the lady an "either-or" dilemma, i.e. either children or puppies; or, at least, first children, then puppies, she briskly turns it into a "both-and" proposition, i.e. both children and puppies. Watch how she does this:

**15:27 But she said, Yea, Lord: For even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.**

C. Her RESILIANCE is shown by her steady good humor though she was desperate.

1. Her obvious humility admitted the truth of whatever name Jesus applied to her. Her quick-witted tact helped her to grasp her relationship with God's plans for Israel and act immediately to take advantage of what she now understood as her relationship. Edersheim (*Life*, II, 41) says so well:

Heathenism may be like the dogs, when compared with the children's place and privileges; but He is their Master still, and they are under His table; and when He breaks the bread, there is enough and to spare for them.